



LION'S ROAR

Deep
Dive *into*
Vipassana



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Theravada, which means “Way of the Elders,” is the earliest form of institutionalized Buddhism. It’s a style based primarily on talks the Buddha gave during his forty-six years of teaching. These talks were memorized and recited (before the internet, people could still do that) until they were finally written down a few hundred years later in Sri Lanka, where Theravada still dominates – and where there is also superb surf. In the US, Theravada mostly manifests through the teaching of Vipassana, particularly its popular meditation technique, mindfulness, the awareness of what is happening now—thoughts, feelings, sensations—without judgment or attachment.

Just as surfing is larger than, say, Kelly Slater, Theravada is larger than mindfulness. It’s a vast system of ethics and philosophies. That said, the essence of Theravada is using mindfulness to explore the Buddha’s first teaching, the Four Noble Truths, which go something like this:

1. Life is stressful.
2. Our constant desires make it stressful.
3. Freedom is possible.
4. Living compassionately and mindfully is the way to attain this freedom.

About those “constant desires”: Theravada practitioners don’t try to stop desire cold turkey. They use mindfulness to observe—and drift in—the waves of desire as they come into being and pass away. As the practitioner learns how these waves of desire, like all thoughts, form on their own, she learns not to identify with them—“I’m experiencing jealousy, so I’m a jealous person”—and those waves stop holding her under. She becomes more fluid and free, more like a surfer: letting bad waves pass, and riding a few good ones before letting those dissolve too.

—Jaimal Yogis from the article *A Surfer’s Guide to Buddhism* on lionsroar.com



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The Heart of This Moment

The practice of metta doesn't require an ambition to save the world, says **Christina Feldman**. It just requires us to bring forth kindness one moment at a time.

THREADED THROUGH the entirety of the Buddha's pathway of awakening are the teachings on cultivating the boundless heart—immeasurable kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. These qualities are referred to as the *brahma viharas*. *Brahma* refers to the sublime or noble tenor of these qualities; *vihara* originally comes from the word for “monastery,” or the place we abide and make our home. We are encouraged, whether standing or walking, sitting or lying down, whenever we are awake to make kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity the home of our heart.

The brahma viharas are relational qualities. They are the foundation of all respectful, healthy, and dignified societies, communities, families, and relationships. Kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity are virtues, wholesome qualities that are the foundation of all ethical thought, speech, and action. They are qualities

to be cultivated in all moments, in the midst of all the conditions and events that touch our lives. They are pathways of awakening and liberation encouraging us to investigate anguish and its origins and to cultivate the path to the end of struggle and discontentment. These ennobling qualities are also the embodied expression of the awakened heart describing the deepest emotional and psychological freedom and maturity of a human being. When these qualities are brought to fruition, they are described as immeasurable, without conditions, and unshakeable. They are the landscape and embodiment of liberation.



The brahma viharas are qualities to be cultivated in all moments, in the midst of all the conditions and events that touch our lives

The experiential taste of the brahma viharas is not a stranger to us. Each of us has encountered moments of unhesitating friendliness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. At times we have been the recipients of these qualities—offered to us by loved ones and by strangers. Equally, we have all known moments when we have responded to others with unreserved kindness and compassion. At times we unexpectedly encounter moments of profound appreciation and joy. In some of the most challenging moments of our lives, we surprise ourselves with our capacity to be balanced and steady. These moments make a powerful imprint on our minds, revealing to us an inner potentiality and way of being

in the world that is responsive and liberated. Too often these moments feel accidental, windows that open to an ennobled way of living that too easily seem to close again. Once more we find ourselves self-absorbed, fearful, and forgetful, lost in the preoccupations of our day. The moments of deepest distress and despair in our lives are the moments when kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity are most prone to disappear, yet these are the moments when these qualities are our greatest allies and most needed.

Rather than being discouraged by these many moments of forgetfulness—the times of anger, fear, despair, and reactivity—we come to recognize that this is the classroom in which the immeasurable capacities of our hearts are nurtured and cultivated. This is a present-moment recollection, a quality of mindfulness where we learn to cultivate kindness in the midst of harshness, compassion in the face of the seemingly impossible, joy in the midst of sorrow and darkness, and equanimity in the midst of the events of our lives that feel designed to unbalance us. This is not a path of postponement that waits for the ideal conditions and moments to be kind, compassionate, joyful, and balanced within. This is the nature of the immeasurable—it embraces all moments, events, and conditions. Kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity can only be cultivated in the present, in our willingness to meet our life with a responsive and wise heart.

In one of the earliest collections of the Buddha's teachings, the *Sutta Nipata*, lies the jewel of the teaching—the *Metta Sutta*, the discourse on immeasurable friendliness. The word *metta* draws on the Pali/Sanskrit word *mitta*, which translates as “friend.” In turn, *mitta* draws on an earlier Sanskrit word *mit* that translates as “growing fat with kindness” or “spreading out”—spreading out in friendliness to the world.

The four immeasurable qualities of kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity should not be seen as linear or hierarchical, yet *metta* is the only one of these qualities that in the early collection of teachings merits its own dedicated discourse. It is seen to be the foundation of an ethical life, of words, thoughts, and acts of integrity. It is understood to be the necessary foundation of all ennobling qualities, including compassion, joy, and equanimity. It is said to be the necessary foundational attitude underlying all meditative development. *Metta* is not described as emotion or a transient state, but as an abiding—the home where our hearts and minds dwell. It is an attitudinal commitment brought to all moments of experience.

With this teaching, the Buddha describes a way of being in the world, in all moments, all circumstances, with a mind abiding in a boundless kindness in which greed, confusion, and ill will have come to an end. It is an all-inclusive befriending, a fearless kindness rooted in mindfulness and insight. *Metta* is also a verb:

“befriending.” We learn to befriend ourselves, all of the people who come into our lives—the difficult and the lovely. We learn to befriend all events and circumstances.

The Buddha recognized, as we recognize, the toxic power of ill will. Hatred, aversion, and fear fracture our communities, our societies, and our world. Historically and today, ill will creates wars and conflict, oppression, violence, and prejudice, and the suffering scars our lives and world. Ill will is not an abstract concept. Each one of us knows the pain of receiving ill will through the thoughts, words, or acts of another. Judgment, blame, harshness, rejection, condemnation, and suspicion leave a powerful imprint on our hearts and minds. We equally know the pain of being gripped by inwardly generated ill will when we judge, condemn, or are harsh to another. We know too the damage done through inwardly directed ill will—the all-too familiar sniping voice of the inner critic and judge that undermines our well-being and happiness.

From a Buddhist psychological perspective, ill will is rooted in fear—the fear of loss, the fear of harm. When our hearts are gripped by fear, we create the sense of “other” that we abandon, flee from, or attack. The “other” may be simply the person who annoys us with restlessness when we want calm, the unwanted person trying to sell us new windows, the person in front of us in line impeding our progress. The “other” may be whole groups of people we condemn, mistrust, or judge. The many forms of

prejudice that scar our world cannot survive without this aversive mechanism that creates the “other,” in turn fueling mistrust, separation, and fear.

At times the “others” that are created and solidified through aversion are aspects of our own being we disdain, judge, or fear: parts of our body, an illness, a chronic pain we fear and turn away from. We can be masters in the art of self-condemnation—disdaining ourselves and forming views of ourselves that are constructed on the foundations of self-hatred. We can have aversion for aversion, telling ourselves that a better or more spiritual person would not experience such ill will, which becomes a base for further self-judgment about our imperfections and inadequacies. We tell ourselves we should be a better person, yet we feel imprisoned by our own habit patterns and feel helpless in the face of them. We may have emotions of jealousy, contempt, or anxiety we feel ashamed of and turn them into the “other” we reject or endeavor to annihilate. The “other” is turned into an enemy within ourselves that we fear and condemn. The underlying narrative in aversion is about nonacceptance, the eternal story that I and the world need to be different from what they are if I am to be happy. In the light of understanding what it means to extend unconditional friendliness to all things, we understand that aversion too asks to be befriended; it also is suffering that can only end through our willingness to be intimate with the landscape of ill will, so it can be understood.

The Buddha put it simply: “Hatred does not cease by hatred. By kindness alone is hatred healed. This is an eternal law.”

When we read the *Metta Sutta*, we may believe it is impossible for us to cultivate a boundless friendliness. Metta does not ask for the ambitious desire to save the entire world but simply to rescue the mind and heart of this moment from the compulsions of ill will. Metta asks us to be a guardian of all that we encounter in this moment—the events, experiences, and people who come into our world, to care for them all. Mindfulness and metta go hand in hand; both can only be cultivated in the moment we are present in; it is the only moment that can be transformed.

Metta is not primarily concerned with how we feel but with the attitudinal commitment and intention we bring to all moments of experience: to forsake the patterns of abandonment that aversion provokes, to learn we can stand next to all events and people and befriend them. Metta swims against the tide of one of the prevailing ideologies of our time that tells us that how we feel about something is the ultimate authority that guides how we speak, act, and relate. The myth of authenticity asserts that if we feel good about something, like something, or are flattered by someone or something, it is worth pursuing, staying close to, investing in, and befriending. The myth that reifies feeling as an authentic guide in our moment-to-moment relationships equally asserts that if we don't feel good about something, dislike, or are threatened by someone or something, then it is only human and reasonable that we push it away, abandon, or ignore it and do our

best to distance ourselves from it. Looking at our lives, we see how many of our choices, strategies, and actions are guided by this myth—at times it is referred to as “being true to ourselves.” If we investigate this pattern without judgment, we may instead discover we are “being true” to emotional habits that do not serve us well.

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Both mindfulness and metta invite us to question this mythology, to begin to understand that, rather than representing authenticity, it may be describing a life in which we agree to being governed by the predominant reaction, emotion, and mental state of the moment. Looking at the world around us, we clearly see there is no shortage of beings who have equated emotional reactivity with freedom. Racist or abusive language becomes a right because it is part of our freedom. We can strike out at another in anger because we are free to do so. Neither metta nor mindfulness condemns the turbulence and power of our emotional and reactive inner world or suggests that we should suppress or ignore the impulses and emotional reactions that arise; the suggestion is to bring a gentle awareness into that world out of concern for the well-being of all beings. We learn to bring into the world of emotional turbulence a few simple questions: Does

this lead to suffering or the end of suffering? Does this lead to a deeper sense of relatedness or to increasing alienation? Does this lead toward freedom or away from a liberated heart?

Immeasurable kindness is not so much concerned with how we feel but how we relate to all feelings, people, events, and experiences. Kindness is only meaningful if it is embodied, the ground of our speech, acts, and choices. It is returning again and again to the commitment and intention to abide in kindness and to befriend all moments of experience. It is learning to sustain that intention and to allow it to be the guide through the tangled and complex world of emotion, relationship, and action.

A parent with a newborn child gets up in the night to tend to its needs; it may be the very last thing he or she feels like doing, yet a parent is guided by the commitment to care and not how he or she feels in that moment. A friend in distress reaches out to us for help—we drop our busyness and respond. It may not be how we feel, but our response is guided by a deeper sense of compassion. A frail and elderly person stumbles on the road in front of us—unhesitatingly we offer a supportive hand without that act being filtered through the lens of how we feel. People on a meditative pathway will find themselves in many moments finding their way to their meditation cushion or seat even though they might in that moment feel that it would be much easier to follow an avenue of distraction or avoidance. These are all acts of embodying a deeper commitment to aspirations and intentions rather than following the predominant mind state or feeling of the moment.

The pathway of metta has mindfulness woven into it. It is a path that asks us to remember the intentions that heal and liberate in all moments of forgetfulness. The path of liberation and transformation found in the brahma viharas is as concerned with what we do and how we live as much as it is concerned with inner development. We do not have to feel generous in order to live with generosity; we do not always have to feel compassionate in order to respond with compassion. Liking or loving something is not a prerequisite to befriending all things and to having kindness be the abiding place we commit to. Just as our minds have an impact upon our actions, so too do our actions have an impact on the shape of our mind and heart.

A student recounted how she committed herself for a year to have her speech rooted in metta, to use words of kindness and gentleness rooted in empathy and respect. She said there were many moments she was tempted to fall into harsh speech, condemning or judging or just engaging in social gossip. She said each morning she renewed the commitment. It did not mean that the aversive, harsh thoughts didn't arise, but in their arising they were met with mindfulness and kindness and rarely made their way into her speech. She said it was a practice that changed her life. She found that people trusted her, turned to her in their most difficult moments without the fear of being judged, that her friendships deepened and her difficult relationships began to ease.

We set our feet and our lives upon a path that draws on the enduring and transforming aspirations and intentions that have the power to heal and liberate our hearts and our world. In every moment of our lives, whether silent or speaking, still or moving, we are always practicing and enacting something. It may be habitual and unconscious; it may be responsive and intentional. This path of awakening invites us to know this, and awareness teaches us that in every moment there is a choice about where we make our home. Where we make our home—whether in the world of fear and aversion or the home of kindness, mindfulness, and befriending—will inevitably shape our thoughts, words, and acts, and how we perceive the world.

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In her poem “Kindness,” Naomi Shihab Nye writes that it is only in seeing the size of the cloth of sorrow that we come to understand that it is only kindness that makes sense anymore. Hand in hand, mindfulness and metta ask us to open our eyes and hearts to the sorrow of our world, to be touched by the struggle, fear, and violence that damage and scar the lives of so many. We

are asked to truly sense the helplessness of those trapped in poverty, neglect, and deprivation, to open our eyes and hearts to the threads of despair, loneliness, and pain that leave too many people in our world forgotten and invisible. Then it is true that only kindness makes sense anymore. To commit ourselves to kindness in our thoughts, words, and acts and to be a conscious participant in healing the world we are part of. Metta brings us out of the shell of self-absorption, allowing us to be touched by the world and to touch the world with kindness. With friendliness and kindness, we take our place in the family of all beings.

From *Boundless Heart: The Buddha's Path of Kindness, Compassion, Joy, and Equanimity*, by Christina Feldman (Shambhala Publications, 2017) ❁



What is American Theravada Buddhism Today?

The oldest lineage of Buddhism, Theravada is known for sharing the earliest recorded teachings of the Buddha. Building on this ancient lineage, Theravada today is innovative and diverse. **Derek Pyle** reports on the tapestry of communities that make up American Theravada.

IN THE UNITED STATES, there is a rich and varied range of Theravada teachers, practices, and communities. There are hundreds of Theravadin temples, monasteries, centers, and communities.

To better understand the landscape of American Buddhism, I interviewed more than two dozen senior Theravada teachers in the US. I wanted to draw a more comprehensive map of American Theravada, but I likely omit many important teachers and communities. I hope others will pick up where I leave off.

Theravada is considered an orthodox Buddhist tradition. It emphasizes adherence to the teachings of the Pali Canon — the earliest recorded teachings attributed to the Buddha — and its commentaries. Theravada is most common in Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia.

In North America, Theravada is often seen as focusing on meditation. In truth, meditation is one aspect of the tradition, which also includes important components, such as:

- the cultivation of generosity alongside moral precepts and ethical training;
- an understanding of karma and its laws;
- study of the Pali Canon and its commentaries and sub-commentaries;
- a range of community services, including outreach and social welfare programs;
- support for immigrant and refugee communities;
- and much more.

To many traditional Theravadins, this larger framework is important. Bhikkhu Bodhi, a leading American Pali scholar and translator, is wary of practicing meditation “without sufficient appreciation of the context in which these techniques are set and [without] the principles and auxiliary practices that should accompany and support meditation practice.”

In America, “Theravada” is also often equated with Insight Meditation and the “vipassana movement.” This is, in part, a racially-informed oversimplification, as both of these communities are predominantly white. Media coverage of American Buddhism often marginalizes or outright ignores Asian American Buddhists.

While practicing in alignment with the Buddha’s original teachings of liberation is a common goal in Theravada, between various teachers and practitioners there are nuanced and often heated debates about how this is best achieved. My intention was to survey this range without holding any single perspective as “authoritative.” To ensure the range of teachings were adequately represented, I relied on interviews and direct quotes whenever possible.

The Vipassana View

Vipassana, or Insight Meditation, is the meditative form most often associated with Theravada. It is also the inspiration behind many secular mindfulness teachings, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction.

Vipassana is often thought of as a tightly-defined meditation technique. In truth, it is not a homogeneous teaching or technique but can refer to a wide array of practices, generally geared toward understanding the Buddha’s teachings of the Four Noble Truths, the three marks of existence, dependent origination,

and the eightfold path, with the goal of liberating the heart and mind. Some teachers emphasize particular systems or methods of practice, while others do not.

“The sociological implications of what Mahasi Sayadaw did were enormous—returning the possibility of liberation to lay people.—SHARON SALZBERG

Three particularly popular vipassana lineages emerged in Burma during the 20th century. Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw and U S.N. Goenka are well-known in the United States for their systematic approaches to intensive meditation practice. The third teacher, the late Venerable Mogok Sayadaw, is hugely popular in Burma but his teachings are not as well-represented in the US.¹

The Satipatthana Sutta is held by many as the most comprehensive overview of traditional Theravadin meditation practices, yet these same practices are subject to an array of practical and technical interpretations. For instance, a well-known framework of Theravada meditation distinguishes between two basic types of practice, insight meditation (vipassana) and calming or tranquility meditation (samatha). But in a more traditional and canonical understanding, vipassana is not a type of meditation at all. “Vipassana actually refers to the direct seeing of the real nature of phenomena,” says Bhikkhu Bodhi, “thus what a person would practice are meditation techniques that lead to vipassana.”

Mahasi Sayadaw's Revolution

Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982) was a great Burmese monk. At a time when most Burmese meditation techniques were taught to monastics only, Mahasi Sayadaw and his students also instructed thousands upon thousands of lay practitioners. Sharon Salzberg, a well-known convert Buddhist American lay teacher authorized to teach by Mahasi Sayadaw, explains, “The sociological implications of what Mahasi Sayadaw did were enormous — returning the possibility of liberation to lay people.”

Many of Mahasi Sayadaw's senior monastics have taught in the United States, including the late Sayadaw U Pandita. Some of these monks immigrated to the United States, often overseeing multiple Burmese American and multiethnic communities. Mahasi Sayadaw's teachings have also become popular in some traditionally Mahayana communities; for instance one of the country's most senior monastics, Bhante Khippapanno — also known as Hòa thượng Kim Triệu — often teaches the Mahasi Method to his Vietnamese American students.²

Mahasi Sayadaw's method of teaching is known today as the “Mahasi Method.” It includes mindfulness of breathing focused on the abdomen, mental noting, and a very slow style of walking meditation. This system is outlined most clearly by Mahasi Sayadaw in his book *The Progress of Insight*. Well-known within this system is Mahasi Sayadaw's formal map of awakening, which corresponds to commentarial *Visuddhimagga* explanations of the path.

Ashin Pyinnya Thiha teaches the Mahasi Method at the Mahasi Satipatthana Meditation Center in New Jersey. “I teach mindfulness meditation based on Mahasi Sayadaw’s way according to the Mahasatipatthana Sutta,” Bhante Pyinnya explains. “If the student follows the Mahasi Method or way of practicing,” says Bhante Pyinnya, “[they] can get the progress of sixteen kinds of insight knowledge through the seven stages of purification.”

The center where Ashin Pyinnya Thiha teaches is a part of the America Burma Buddhist Association (ABBA), the U.S. affiliate of the Mahasi Meditation Center of Burma. Like most monastic traditions in the U.S. and Asia, the ABBA community is sustained through donations, while all ABBA activities including residencies and retreats are offered free of charge. This model of teaching is fundamental to the traditional Theravadin framework: the Dharma is considered priceless; therefore, there can be no cost associated with it. Thus monastics freely support the community in a variety of ways, including teaching. In turn, monastics are deeply dependent on the generosity of lay community support – Theravadin monastics cannot handle money, cook, or even store food.

In this way, monastics and lay practitioners alike cultivate the parami of dana, which is translated as generosity, giving, or charity. Dana is not simply a financial or economic practice but rather a way of cultivating the heart, and cultivating communities, through an ethos of mutual interdependence and responsibility. While many American lay centers have modified this

understanding of dana in a variety of ways, there are a few notable exceptions including the communities maintained by Santikaro, Gil Fronsdal and Andrea Fella, and the centers in the tradition of U S.N. Goenka, all of which operate solely based on dana.

U S.N. Goenka, Global Teacher

U S.N. Goenka (1924–2013) and his teacher Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1899–1971) were Burmese laymen who emphasized ten-day intensive meditation courses (retreats), primarily for lay practitioners. There are numerous centers around the world offering courses in the tradition of U S.N. Goenka (respectfully known as Goenkaji) and Sayagyi U Ba Khin, including twelve centers in the States.

“Sayagyi U Ba Khin and Goenkaji wanted the Dhamma to reach as many people globally as possible... and Goenkaji prided himself on teaching exactly what his teacher taught,” says Barry Lapping, the head teacher at the Dhamma Dhara Vipassana Meditation Center in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts.

“The teaching is presented via audio and video recordings of Goenkaji in order to maintain the consistency of the technique worldwide,” explains Lapping, while “the conducting teachers run the course, give guidance to the students, meditate with the students and answer their questions.” While the centers do not track specific demographics of their students, “there are courses for different communities based on language, including Khmer, Burmese, Hindi, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Thai.”

In keeping with the traditional Theravadin emphasis on *dana*, all centers are supported solely by donations. “An important principle in this tradition is that no one should have to pay for the teaching, and no one should profit by it,” explains Lapping. Course teachers and volunteers do not receive any financial compensation; students understand that everything they receive is from those who previously sat courses and they, in turn, have the opportunity to donate so others can receive the same benefits in future retreats.

At the beginning of each course, students take the five moral precepts and then develop a base of concentration (*samadhi*) through *anapanasati* or mindfulness of breathing. On the fourth day, students begin vipassana practice. “They learn to move their attention systematically through the body,” says Lapping. Cultivating equanimity in response to all sensations is key to the method.

“To experience the body, you must be aware of what is happening in the body—that is, *vedana*—sensations,” says Lapping. “Similarly, whatever happens in the mind—any thought, emotion, recollection—is reflected by sensations in the body. *Vedana* is the key that allows us to observe the entire mental-physical structure and develop equanimity.”

While U S.N. Goenka was his best-known student, the late German American Ruth Denison was also a disciple of Sayagyi U Ba Khin, although she eventually modified her teachings in ways that diverged from her teacher. Her women’s retreats were particularly popular among LGBTQ women. “She offered a gateway,

an open door to the Dharma, to lesbians who might not otherwise have chosen to enter into Buddhist practice,” explains biographer Sandy Boucher. Boucher adds that Arinna Weisman, a student of Denison, was one of the first teachers to offer LGBTQ-specific retreats, co-taught by Eric Kolvig.³

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If you watch the breath — or anything else you might be noticing — then you can also know that there is the mind that’s watching the breath. And when you’re watching the breath, you can also know everything attendant to the breath, like your feelings and your thoughts.—MOUSHUMI GOSH

U S.N. Goenka was a major influence on many Insight Meditation Society teachers. “The Buddha did not teach Buddhism, he taught a way of life,” Salzberg recalls U S.N. Goenka saying, a perspective which is now key for many in mainstream as well as secular Buddhism.

The Streams of IMS and Spirit Rock

In 1975, the founding of Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts catalyzed an extraordinarily popular and influential current within mainstream American Buddhism. Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, and Jacqueline Mandell (née Schwartz), all of them Jewish converts to Buddhism, were

the center's founders and early core teachers. Today, IMS — along with the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies,⁴ the Forest Refuge, and its de facto sister center Spirit Rock in California — serves as a hub for dozens of formally and informally connected teachers, centers, and practitioners. Spirit Rock, in particular, has grown to become a major player in the Buddhist world in its own right since its founding in 1987. As Lion's Roar reported in a 25th-anniversary profile of Spirit Rock, the center was by that time serving 40,000 visitors a year.

Blending Theravada lineages is a hallmark of IMS and Spirit Rock. Important early teacher-lineages included Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw; Anagarika Munindra and Dipa Ma, students of Mahasi Sayadaw; Sayadaw U Pandita, a successor of Mahasi Sayadaw; Venerable Ajahn Chah; and U S.N. Goenka. “Munindra was extremely open-minded in his approach,” says Goldstein. “I think that's where I derived that basic framework of openness for my own practice and understanding.”

For Salzberg, the master laywoman Dipa Ma was “hugely important... She was the person who told me to teach.” A close student of U S.N. Goenka, Jacqueline Mandell was encouraged to teach in the States by Venerable Taungpulu Sayadaw and Dr. Rina Sircar. “Taungpulu Sayadaw taught by temperament,” says Mandell. “He individualized the practices.” The late Taungpulu Sayadaw and Dr. Sircar were also important teachers in Burmese

American communities. It was Sayadaw U Pandita who taught Sharon Salzberg the metta practices that would later become a fixture at IMS and Spirit Rock retreats.

Unlike Mahasi Sayadaw and U S.N. Goenka, Venerable Ajahn Chah did not offer students a systematized or standardized map of practice. In his book *Bringing Home the Dharma*, Jack Kornfield summarizes Ajahn Chah's teachings as "using every experience as your practice... opening up to each experience to see what is happening... learning to let go... [and recognizing] the one who knows how to rest in wisdom and equanimity."

Both centers maintain connections with monastic communities, and many IMS and Spirit Rock teachers also train in outside traditions, including Advaitin, Dzogchen, and Western psychotherapy. In February 2019, IMS changed their mission statement to reflect that the center is aligning themselves with "Early Buddhism" rather than Theravada — a change that could herald Theravada reforms in the 21st century.

In recent years a handful of IMS and Spirit Rock teachers, organizing themselves under the auspices of the Wisdom Streams Foundation, have practiced and taught under Burmese monk Sayadaw U Tejaniya.⁵

Moushumi Ghosh, Sayadaw U Tejaniya's English translator, explains one of Sayadaw's central teachings: "If you watch the breath — or anything else you might be noticing — then you can

also know that there is the mind that's watching the breath. And when you're watching the breath, you can also know everything attendant to the breath, like your feelings and your thoughts."

Expanding the Refuge

In 1983 Jacqueline Mandell formally left the Theravadin tradition. Prompted by the historical as well as contemporary gender inequality in Theravada Buddhism, Mandell wrote about her decision in the first issue of *Inquiring Mind*.

"It needed to be said from a place of leadership," Mandell reflects now. "I realized I had an ability to say something and maybe it would make a difference."

Mandell's push toward equality heralded an important turning point in the development and expression of the Dharma at IMS and, later, Spirit Rock. To this day, both institutions strive to address inequality, diversity, and inclusion.⁶ The organizations are now focusing on addressing racism and increasing leadership opportunities for people of color and LGBTQIA people.

"Our lessons learned will increase the rapidity at which we can integrate and bring about transformation in other areas," explains DaRa Williams, one of the African American teachers at the helm of these initiatives.

Many white teachers at IMS and Spirit Rock, says Williams, are also working to understand how intersectionality informs their own life experiences. “It’s been hugely rewarding, for me personally,” says Joseph Goldstein, “and also for the institution, to see all the work being done — it’s been tremendous.”

In recent years, the growing number of POC and LGBTQIA practice communities associated with IMS and Spirit Rock have attracted more and more young people to the practice. The Against the Stream (ATS) communities — often overseen by hip, tattooed and streetwise teachers — were also popular among younger practitioners until allegations of misconduct by founder Noah Levine surfaced in 2018 and the community disbanded. Some of the teachers from ATS have started a new socially-minded Buddhist group under the name “Meditation Coalition,” which also promises to attract a younger demographic. All in all, there is an increasing focus on making teachings more accessible to young people.

Yet the cost of IMS and Spirit Rock retreats remain prohibitive for many, although both centers offer some significant scholarships, and formerly incarcerated persons can sit IMS retreats at no cost.

The centers’ underlying economic models are a modified form of the traditional Theravadin ethic — the retreat fees contribute to the centers’ annual operating costs, while most teachers and some staff do not have fixed incomes but are dependent on additional donations (dana) offered by students and retreat attendees.

Subsequent to the widespread influence of IMS and Spirit Rock, this model has been adopted by many of the country's lay residential and nonresidential centers.

Changing Landscapes in Asian American Communities

Sri Lankan American monk Venerable Bhante Seelawimala, of the American Buddhist Seminary, says he is concerned about decreased engagement in younger Asian American Theravada Buddhists. The ABS website writes that many monastics “lack sufficient background in developing communication skills with these immigrant children who are growing up in America... mainly due to the language and cultural gaps between the monks and the younger generation.”

Conversely, researcher Chenxing Han is studying the nuanced experiences of young Asian American Buddhists. While not specifically focused on Theravadin communities, Han highlights how many Asian American Buddhists do not fit into easy typologies of experience or cultural background. In her *Buddhadharma* article “We’re Not Who You Think We Are,” Han writes, “The young adult Asian Americans I spoke to are both evidence and upholders of American Buddhism’s multivocality.”

Many monastics who immigrate to the U.S. also hope to teach outside of their specific ethnic communities but are unable to do so, explains Ayya Tathaaloka, a white American *bhikkhuni* (a fully-ordained female monastic) who spent many years practicing in

predominately Asian American communities. “Especially amongst the younger monks, many of them come wishing to share the Buddha’s teachings more broadly,” says Tathaaloka, “but in so many places the connections are not in place.”

Stalwarts of American Jhana

Jhana practice is an important set of traditional teachings not generally found in mainstream mindfulness communities. Jhanas can roughly be understood as very deep and particular types of *samadhi*, or concentration—though there are many nuances and important debates about the nature of that concentration. In the United States, only a handful of teachers specifically teach jhana practice.

Students sitting the annual IMS and Spirit Rock rains retreats, or practicing at the Forest Refuge, may receive jhana instructions from individual teachers. While these instructions vary based on the teacher’s own training, Joseph Goldstein says, “a number of us learned a particular method from U Pandita Sayadaw, which we have also taught on an individual basis to many meditators [and fellow teachers] over the years.” In this method, metta practice is often used to develop jhana.

Burmese monastic Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw’s teachings on jhana are largely systematized, corresponding to the classic treatise *Visuddhimagga* and sutta maps of practice. In the States, Pa-Auk Sayadaw has many Burmese American as well as Malaysian American students, says Tina Rasmussen, one of Pa-Auk Sayadaw’s

senior students. Pa-Auk Sayadaw has spent considerable amounts of time teaching in these communities and at the Forest Refuge in Barre, Massachusetts. “Sayadaw Pa-Auk’s teacher told him that part of his dharma, his life’s truth,” says Rasmussen, “was to plant the seeds of the samatha practice in the West.”

In years past, Tina Rasmussen and her husband Stephen Snyder served assistant teachers during some of Pa-Auk Sayadaw’s residencies here, and they continue to teach independently in the States. Since the depth of absorption required by Pa-Auk Sayadaw is quite difficult for many, Rasmussen says, “Sayadaw and his students encouraged us to write *Practicing the Jhanas* to outline the method of first obtaining jhana.”⁷

Leigh Brasington was a student of the late Venerable Ayya Khema, a German-born pioneer of the modern Bhikkuni Sangha. “Anybody who studied with Ayya Khema was struck by her clarity,” says Brasington. Ayya Khema learned jhana practices through the study of the Pali canon and commentaries and was later encouraged to teach jhana by the Sri Lankan monk Most Venerable Matara Sri Nanarama Maha Thera.

While following a clear map of jhanic progression, also outlined in his book *Right Concentration*, Brasington allows students a range of methods for developing concentration. Likewise, when moving from jhana to insight practice, Brasington encourages students to use whichever insight method they prefer. “I figure it’s not so important how you examine reality,” he says, “but that you examine reality.”⁸

Venerable Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, founder and abbot of the Bhavana Society in West Virginia, also teaches jhana practices. Bhante G, as he is known, was born at a time when meditation practices were largely suppressed in Sri Lanka due to colonialism. Thus Venerable Gunaratana learned meditation through experience, using his knowledge and understanding of the texts as a guide. Known also for his teachings on mindfulness and loving-kindness, his books *The Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation and Beyond Mindfulness in Plain English* outline his teachings on jhana.

Venerable Gunaratana also has longstanding ties with the Washington Buddhist Vihara, the country's oldest Theravada monastic community. While the organizations are not formally linked, the Washington Buddhist Vihara and the Bhavana Society form an important nexus of American Theravada. Venerable Gunaratana has also supported female monastic ordination in the US.⁹

Bhante Vimalaramsi, a monastic who has reached many students via successful online outreach, also teaches jhana but as a kind of understanding rather than level of absorption.

Forest Monks of Thailand

Throughout the history of Theravada, there have been many monastics who wander the wilderness committed to solitary practice. Renowned master Venerable Ajahn Mun (1870–1949), a Theravada reformer, emphasized such a return to the roots of

Buddhism through asceticism, intensive meditation, and rigorous ethical conduct. He established the Thai Forest Tradition based on those principles. Venerable Ajahn Maha Boowa (1913–2011) and Venerable Ajahn Chah (1918–1992) were two of Ajahn Mun’s best-known students.

In the US, many Thai Forest monastics are either white converts or Thai American, but there is a wide range of community demographics. Wat San Fran serves a predominately Thai American community and is particularly popular among millennials. On the other hand, Venerable Ajahn Maha Prasert’s temple in Fremont, California has of the most diverse congregations in the country, with Thai Americans comprising the minority-majority.

Even the name “Thai Forest” itself is something of an ethnic misnomer. “The northeast of Thailand, where Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Mun, and Ajahn Maha Boowa were from,” says Ajahn Pasanno, “it’s an area that speaks a Laotian dialect.”

In the Thai Forest Tradition, there is less of a divide between insight and concentration practice. “Meditative concentration and wisdom may be likened to two wheels of a cart: only when both wheels work in unison can the cart move forward,” says Ajaan Dick Silaratano, a senior student of Ajahn Maha Boowa. Since various students have different capacities for absorption, Ajaan Dick says, “most of the Thai Forest masters refrain from speaking publicly about jhana, preferring to talk about samadhi in more general terms.”

In general, Thai Forest monks have great respect for the natural world. The late Venerable Luang Por Thoon would instruct students, says his student Phra Anandapanyo, to correct wrong perception through observing the natural world. “In your daily life, in the forest, in the city, there’s metaphor in the world,” Phra Anandapanyo explains. “Use that to reflect and look into yourself, make a parallel, and see: okay, perhaps what you believe is wrong and you have to let go of it.”

“

Convert Buddhists need to pay respects to the history we’re drawing on, not just appropriate the bits we like and then pretend we’re more advanced than Asian American Buddhists.—SANTIKARO

Abhayagiri monastery in Northern California has played an important role in connecting many lay practitioners to the deeper monastic roots of Theravada. Ajahn Chah was hugely popular amongst Thai and international students alike, and it was important to him that his “Western” students establish monasteries in their home countries, to maintain “the traditional [Buddhist] model, of how monastic community and the lay community functions together, creating an integral part of a society or culture,” says Ajahn Pasanno.

Many Thai Forest teachers encourage self-reliance and solitary practice, and they are less likely to instruct students through formalized systems of practice. “The person has to find the technique themselves,” says Ajahn Vuttichai, also known as Phrawoody, a senior student of Venerable Ajahn Jarnian.

Thai Forest teachings often emphasize awareness and the knowing nature of mind. “It’s the ground of one’s practice, what one roots the practice in,” says Ajahn Pasanno, “but it’s also what takes one to a place of, say, liberating the heart.” Ajaan Dick Silaratano, like many Thai Forest teachers, refers to this as “citta, or the mind’s essential knowing nature.”

Thai Forest teachings on awareness have drawn comparisons to the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁰ In one method, systematized by the late Thai monk Luangpor Teean (1911–1988), the student first learns to cultivate awareness through a traditional rhythmic hand movement. Next, one “learns to ‘see’ thought, as opposed to just knowing that one is thinking,” says lay teacher Michael Bresnan. “After one is able to see thought, then we can be aware of awareness itself.”¹¹

Along with the many American Thai Forest communities,¹² Thai Forest teachings have also impacted many convert Buddhist teachers outside of the Thai Forest lineage. Santikaro, a white American lay teacher, says that his Thai Forest training was essential to his understanding of the path, but worries about cultural appropriation. He notes that convert Buddhists need to

“pay respects to the history we’re drawing on, not just appropriate the bits we like and then pretend we’re more advanced than Asian American Buddhists.”

In recent years, a Theravada reform movement with connections to the Thai Forest Tradition, called Buddhawajana, has gained momentum amongst Thai Americans. Led by Ajahn Kukrit, a former student of Ajahn Chah, the movement is hugely popular in Thailand.

Outside of the forest tradition, a popular form of Thai meditation is called *vijja dhammakaya*. The term “dhammakaya” is often associated with Thailand’s largest temple, Wat Phra Dhammakaya, but numerous temples independently teach *vijja dhammakaya* as a meditation method. Wat Phra Dhammakaya has dozens of branches around the world, including sixteen centers in the United States, which are attended primarily by Thai Americans. But within Thailand, the Wat Phra Dhammakaya community faces widespread allegations of corruption, including a series of ongoing political and legal conflicts. The topic is too complex to explore in detail here, but such controversies highlight something too often neglected in the “mainstream” American image of Buddhism: the reality that sanghas — of all ethnicities, both here and abroad — must remain ever vigilant against corruption and abuses of power.

The Spread of Sri Lankan Mahamevnawa Monasteries

Mahamevnawa is a hugely popular meditation movement, originating in Sri Lanka at the turn of the 21st century. The tradition is striking particularly for its rapid growth — there are dozens of Mahamevnawa centers around the world including six in the United States, all of which emphasize orthodox yet accessible approaches to practice and textual study. The centers here mostly serve Sri Lankan Americans, although Bhante Kachchana — a residing monk at the Mahamevnawa branch monastery in California — explains that he is interested in teaching others as well. When teaching beginners, Bhante Kachchana emphasizes traditional loving-kindness and mindfulness of breathing practices. “There are many meditation methods,” he acknowledges, “but basically those are very important.”

It can be helpful to think about the world and its suffering before beginning loving-kindness practice, says Bhante Kachchana. “You can think about how people are living in this world, what are their problems,” he says. “There are thousands of millions of people in this world, and there is a lot of suffering.”

After one is comfortable practicing loving-kindness and breathing meditation, Bhante Kachchana recommends contemplating the nature of the sense bases and their objects. The students think “true nature of eye, true nature of form, true nature of ear, true nature of sounds,” and so forth, and then turns to contemplate the three marks of existence with reference to each

sense base. “This eye is impermanent, not ‘I am,’ not mine, not myself. This ear is impermanent, not me, not ‘I am,’ not myself. Like that.”

Although these three practices may be particularly suitable for beginners, Bhante Kachchana emphasizes the helpfulness and importance of the full Sutta Pitaka for practice. “We have many Dhamma talks given by Supreme Buddha,” he says, “so we just follow those explanations.”

Revitalizing Cambodian American Vipassana

Wat Kiryvongsa Bopharam in Leverett, Massachusetts is one of the only Cambodian American temples that emphasizes meditation, and Cambodian Americans travel from around the country to attend their annual summer retreat. I spoke to Venerable Dejapanno Phorn Pheap, the temple’s residing meditation teacher, through a translator, Sakal Kim. (Kim also assists with many of the temple’s Khmer-based media productions.)

Venerable Dejapanno was a student of the late master Venerable Keto Dhammo, who was responsible for revitalizing Vipassana Dhura throughout Cambodia until he was assassinated in 2003. Venerable Keto Dhammo had a systematized approach to teaching meditation, explains Venerable Dejapanno, which has three levels and takes twelve years to complete. The first level takes three years. The second level requires four.

The student begins by studying the Vinaya and the Triple Gem, then trains in anapanasati. “The goal here is to focus on the mind,” says Venerable Dejapanno, “make sure the mind is one.” After mastering anapanasati the student learns vipassana with the traditional forty Theravada meditation subjects. “Any one of these types of meditation you can learn to adapt or suit to your style,” says Venerable Dejapanno.

The second level is jhana practice. “Once you’re good at it,” says Venerable Dejapanno, “even people talking near you, they will not disturb you.” Venerable Dejapanno was unable to train in the third level before leaving Cambodia, but which levels you master is not important, he says. “At the end, if you’re good at it, you will receive the same merit and reach the same goal.” Meditation brings peace, says Venerable Dejapanno, and it applies to all people. “Once you get rid of desire there’s no more disputes, no war,” he says. “We can all live in peace and harmony.”

Bhikkhuni Robes, Flags of the Arhats

Bhikkhunis are fully-ordained Buddhist female monastics. In Theravada, the lineage was only recently revived; Bhikkhuni ordinations were not available to women for most of the second millennium. In the States, the Bhikkhuni revival may represent the quintessential Buddhist community; it requires a strong mix of tradition and adaptation, with support coming from far-flung schools of Buddhism, lineages, and countries.

Ayya Tathaaloka has written about the history of American Bhikkhuni ordinations in “Honoring Those Worthy of Honor,” an article published by the Alliance for Bhikkhunis. Beginning in 1987, many of the early ordinations, she writes, were organized by the late Most Venerable Dr. Havanpola Ratanasara Maha Thero (1920–2000) with the assistance of Venerable Dr. Walpola Piyananda, both Sri Lankan American monks.

The largest of these early ordinations took place at the Buddha’s Light International Foundation’s newly inaugurated Hsi Lai Temple in Southern California and was coordinated on a truly international scale with a total of 200 bhikkhuni candidates, “includ[ing] twelve eight- and ten-precept nuns from various Theravada traditions,” writes Ayya Tathaaloka, “and eight getsulmas from Tibetan monastic traditions, with the remainder of the ordination candidates being from Korean, Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Chinese, Indonesian, and Thai Mahayana traditions.” After all of the bhikkhunis received Theravada monastic ordination, some also chose to undertake Bodhisattva precepts. Vajrayana monastics were also present, to supplement the training of the Tibetan traditions’ candidates.

While bhikkhuni ordinations remain a point of contention in some monastic communities, these and subsequent ordinations are not the product of renegade monks and nuns. Venerable Ratansara and the Buddha’s Light International Association

were respectively, as Ayya Tathaaloka writes, “the leading Theravada Buddhist prelate in the Western Hemisphere and one of the strongest Buddhist organizations in the world.”

When I interviewed Ayya Tathaaloka, she spoke of Venerable Ratanasara’s hopes for the Bhikkhuni Sangha, and his vision of Buddhist harmony. “It was one of the conditions for my ordination,” she explains. “He didn’t want to ordain anyone who was going to be strongly and divisively ethnosectarian, especially among Westerners.” He was inspired by the possibilities of a “family reunion” between Buddhist traditions in the United States.

“

In the Sangha, you have all the colors of the Buddha’s full radiance when you gather all of these diverse teachers, multifaceted teachings and manifold paramis back together again.—VENERABLE RATANASARA

“Venerable Ratanasara had this strong image of the Buddha’s time, with the colors of the Buddha’s radiance spreading through the Sangha into all these different countries, and each teacher sharing in their own unique ways aspects of the Buddha’s radiance, from their own awakening, based on their unique experiences, strengths, and paramis,” says Ayya Tathaaloka. Venerable Ratanasara articulated his vision: “In the Sangha, you have all the

colors of the Buddha’s full radiance when you gather all of these diverse teachers, multifaceted teachings and manifold paramis back together again.”

This reunification of traditions typifies many bhikkhuni communities, so there is no simple way to summarize lineages or teaching styles. “People ask us: ‘what is your lineage; is it Thai? American? Sri Lankan?’” says Ayya Anandabodhi, a Welsh-born bhikkhuni who immigrated to the US. “But it’s much broader — it’s the Bhikkhuni lineage.” In Southern California there are many bhikkhus and bhikkhunis in the Vietnamese Du Tang Khai Si Mendicant Sangha, a fused Theravada-Mahayana tradition; Venerable Dr. Pannavati in North Carolina is a former Christian pastor and dual Theravada-Mahayana bhikkhuni who has received Zen transmission and Vajrayana empowerments; in Northern California, convert Buddhist bhikkhuni ordinations receive strong support from Sri Lankan American as well as Thai- and Lao- bhikkhu communities.¹³

Monastic code, as found in the traditional Vinaya Pitaka, is of central importance to all Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis. Yet numerous parts of the Bhikkhuni Vinaya text are unclear, and thus subject to varying interpretations. “There are so many outstanding questions in Vinaya I’d really like to have the time to research more fully,” says Ayya Tathaaloka.

This research, and sharing its results, is the focus of the Bhikkhuni Vibhanga Project — a collaborative project overseen by a team of bhikkhunis, including Ayya Tathaaloka, and supported

by the Alliance for Bhikkhunis. One important research question, Ayya Tathaaloka says, is around ordination for transgender and gender non-conforming persons. Ayya Tathaaloka has begun examining this in Vinaya, she says, and feels “hopeful about the value of deeper study with regards to this and other questions.”

In recent years “Western” lay practitioners, especially lay women, have played a large role in supporting the Bhikkhuni Sangha. One vehicle for such support is the Alliance for Bhikkhunis, a nonprofit founded by Susan Pembroke to honor her teacher, the late Venerable Ayya Khema. “To see a nun wearing the robe, a female renunciant with an aspiration to awaken,” says Ayya Anandabodhi, “this wakes something up in the hearts of women, like *I could do this too.*”

American Theravada in the 21st Century

The seeds of American Buddhism are sown, but if the teachings are to flourish here, we must not forget the Dharma’s deep and varied roots.

In Theravada Buddhism, it is essential to understand the interdependence of lay practitioners and the monastic Sangha — and the ways in which both groups support and illuminate the path to awakening. This interplay is something often missed in “convert” Buddhist communities.

When it comes to reconciling Asian and non-Asian communities, or otherwise creating more inclusive dharma centers, convert Buddhists, in particular, should remain cautious about forms

of bridging that replicate hegemonic assimilation or colonialism. If “mainstream” Buddhist consciousness is to expand its recognition of Theravada teachings and traditions, this will require building many bridges, and each community will have its own path to navigate. May the Devas guide and protect us. 🌸

1. According to researcher Pyi Phyo Kyaw, some senior meditation teachers in the Mogok Sayadaw tradition, including Aung San Saxyadaw, have taught here in Burmese American communities.
2. Influential visiting monastics have included Sayadaw U Janaka (Chanmyay Sayadaw), and the late Sayadaw U Pandita and Sayadaw U Lakkhana. Emigrating monastics include Bhante Khippapanno, Achan Sobin S. Namto (who has since moved back to Thailand), Sayadaw Ashin Indaka, Ayya Gunasari, and the late Sayadaw U Silananda. Teaching to many Chinese American students, Malaysian monk Bhante Sujiva is another monk who teaches in local Mahayana communities.
3. Another popular student of Sayagyi U Ba Khin was the late Burmese teacher Mya Thwin, known by her students as Mother Sayamagyi. With a similar emphasis on preserving Sayagyi U Ba Khin’s methods, Mother Sayamagyi’s students oversee a branch of her International Meditation Centre in Westminster, Maryland.
4. Guided by faculty members such as scholar and meditation master Bhikkhu Anayayo, Barre Center for Buddhist Studies has also become a hub for the study of Early Buddhist Texts – for instance, comparing the Pali Canon and the Chinese Agamas for similarities and differences.
5. Vietnamese American monk Venerable Bhante Khippapanno also trained with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, and Sayadaw U Tejaniya has taught at Bhante’s various centers around the country. Bhante Khippapanno and his students oversee the Shwe Oo Min Forest Meditation Center in Virginia, says Moushumi Ghosh, where Sayadaw U Tejaniya is the honorary guiding teacher. Bhante Khippapanno also teaches at the Forest Refuge in Barre, Massachusetts.

6. Like most aspects of IMS and Spirit Rock, these transformations are influenced by a wide array of people, including teachers Anushka Fernandopulle, DaRa Williams, Gina Sharpe, Larry Yang, Pascal Auclair, Spring Washam, and the late Dr. Marlene Jones. At Spirit Rock, Betsy Rose and Dawn Scott have been particularly effective leaders in the family and teen programs.
7. While Pa-Auk Sayadaw does not teach many retreats in the U.S. currently, he often spends his own rains retreat time practicing in Northern California at a hermitage maintained by his students. His monastics students, including Sayadaw U Jagara, Venerable Dhammadipa, Sayalay Dipankara, and Sayalay Susila, often teach in the U.S. Additional U.S. students authorized to teach by Pa-Auk Sayadaw include Marcia Rose, Shaila Catherine, and Nikki Mirghafori.
8. Students subsequently authorized by Brasington to teach jhana include Lloyd Burton, Mary Aubry, and Jay Michaelson.
9. Ayya Sudhamma Bhikkhuni, Bhikkhuni Sudinna, and Ayya Sobhana Theri, among others, trained as novice ordinates at Bhavana Society.
10. Although there are significant differences between each teachers' approach, the teachings on awareness taught by Ajahn Jumnian, the students of the late Venerable Luangpor Teean, and convert Buddhist lay teacher Heather Sundberg are all described as "MahaSati" practices.
11. Luangpor Teean's systematized method for recognizing awareness is taught in the States by Thai American monastics Achan Da Nilpant, Achan Niphen Nontamart, and convert Buddhist lay teacher Michael Bresnan as well as the Thai monk Luangpor Thong.

12. In the US, additional Thai Forest communities include Forest Dhamma Monastery, Oregon Ariyamagga Okasati Refuge, Wat Pa Colorado, the Colorado Forest Monastery, Wat Concord, Wat Ohio, Atammayatarama Buddhist Monastery, and Metta Forest Monastery. The abbot of Metta Forest Monastery, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, is a prominent meditation teacher and scholar, translating many Pali and Thai texts into English. Furthermore, at least three bhikkhuni viharas — Aloka Vihara Forest Monastery, Dhammadharini Monastery, and Karuna Buddhist Vihara — also have significant connections to the Thai Forest tradition.

13. Another popular and fast-growing bhikkhuni community, generally outside of “mainstream” American Buddhism’s awareness, is Buddha Catu Parisa Maha Vihara in Alaska. The vihara is a Thai American branch monastery of the international Sikkha Buddhavacana Pariyattidhamma 84,000 Dhammakhandha Foundation, a dual bhikkhu and bhikkhuni sangha that emphasizes Abhidhamma study and strict monastic code. The community is also establishing a vihara in the San Francisco–Bay Area. ❁



Full-Stop Mind

The late Burmese teacher Mahasi Sayadaw helped to revitalize the Vipassana tradition with his precise teachings on meditation. His student **Bhante Bodhidhamma** presents Mahasi's simple and direct method for slowing down and ultimately halting conceptual thinking.

IT HAS BEEN more than 2,500 years since the Buddha first expounded the teachings. Throughout history, the teachings, the dhamma, have at times lost their vitality. But reformation movements—some large, some small—have always helped to revive them. In Theravadan Buddhist countries, the Burmese teacher Mahasi Sayadaw has been credited widely with bringing new insight to the practice of vipassana. His system demands a total dedication to keeping the attention inward, from the moment of waking until the end of the day. The three characteristics of Mahasi's technique are observing the breath at the abdomen, noting, and going very slowly.

Observing the Breath at the Abdomen

In vipassana meditation we observe the breath, or rather the sensations caused by breathing, in order to concentrate moment to moment. Because the breath is a neutral object, this practice effectively calms the heart-mind. There are several places where meditators feel the sensation of breathing, and they vary from person to person. Some feel it more at the nostrils or upper lip, others in the rising and falling of the chest, and still others in the abdomen. In terms of vipassana meditation, observing the breath at any of these places is a valid practice.

Mahasi, however, favored observing the sensations of the breath at the abdomen, in part because it is related to slow walking. Just as we observe and experience the foot rising and falling, so we experience the abdomen rising and falling. With awareness of the breath in the abdomen, for the better part of the day a meditator can observe the characteristic of transience in a very obvious way. Observing transience or impermanence (*anicca*) is one of the ways in which the Buddha asks us to investigate ourselves. Is there anything we experience that is not impermanent? The other two avenues of investigation are observing dissatisfaction (*dukkha*) and not-self (*anatta*). According to the Buddha, our insights into these three characteristics of existence can lead to liberation from all suffering.

The second reason Mahasi favored focusing on sensations at the abdomen is that when we concentrate on the breath at the nostrils, we tend to lose contact with the body. That is why

observing the breath at the nostrils is a popular and effective way of achieving those higher states of concentration known as the absorptions, or jhanas. But in absorption, there is a danger. When concentration locks one-pointedly on a single object, the effect is to suppress everything else. Such focus stops the process of purifying the heart, which is our emotional life. This is not to say that deep concentration practice cannot go hand-in-hand with vipassana. Indeed, such practice is well supported in the Buddha's *Discourse on How to Establish Mindfulness (Satipatthana Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya 10)*. But Mahasi espoused the direct path of vipassana only (*ekayano maggo*).

The Mahasi technique does not preclude observing the breath at the nostrils. Although Mahasi preferred the abdomen as a place of primary observation, he did not ban anyone from observing sensations at the nostrils. However, when we center our attention instead on the abdomen or chest (when the breath is shallow), we remain in closer contact with body. This is an important element, as our emotions, moods, and other mental states express themselves through the body, often as blocks or aches and pains or even as raw emotion. Allowing mental turbulence to express itself within consciousness and bearing it patiently in meditation is how we burn it off. This is the psychotherapeutic effect of vipassana.

Noting

Noting is the second component of the vipassana technique that Mahasi Sayadaw taught. Paradoxically, the result of noting is that it takes a meditator beyond thinking. It is not an end in itself. The Buddha taught that there are two stages of concentrated thought before full concentration is established. The first is a simple noting or naming of the object. This act of labeling, *vitakka*, whereby the attention is pointed at the object, is likened to a bee flying toward a flower. The label encapsulates the whole experience. In children just beginning to speak, this process is very obvious and simplistic. They rejoice at being able to name an object—“Car! Car!” At their level of linguistic development, the word “car” simply points to the object. There’s not much thought around the word, since language itself, which allows us to think about an object, is not that developed yet.

For adults, the word “car” conjures up a host of memories and desires. We are thinking *about* an object, which is known as proliferation (*papañca*). Thinking and daydreaming serve to keep our attention off the presenting object and distract the mind. The Buddha likened this thinking mind to a monkey that jumps from branch to branch. We have to rein the monkey in. Shrinking thought down to a single word is the preliminary effort. At this stage the meditator has to keep pulling the attention out of wandering and into observing. That’s what training with a technique is all about: reconditioning consciousness to be present and attentive to what’s happening now.

Noting is an acknowledgement of what the body, heart, and mind are doing. For it to be effective, it has to be practiced with precision. For example, on waking from a fantasy, there is the first note: we recognize that we are arguing, planning, or lusting. Then there is further noting, which acknowledges what we are obsessing about. In the same way, if a sensation or feeling arises in the body, the first note is recognition, and the second and all subsequent notes are acknowledgements of what is really happening now. The attention is placed not on the word but on the experience: the feeling of a sensation, the feeling of an emotion. It is as though the intuitive intelligence sees *through* the word, experiencing the sensation or emotion directly. In this way conceptual thinking is brought into the service of intuitive intelligence, rather than continuing to obscure it.

We tend to be confused about this original intuitive intelligence. The activities of our body, mind, and heart—sensations, thoughts, and emotions—make us think there is a “me.” This mistaken identity, which the Buddha referred to as the self, *atta* (*atman* in Sanskrit), is the root of our problem. The Buddha’s teaching of not-self, *anatta* (*anatman*), encourages us to develop the understanding that anything we experience that arises and passes away cannot be a “me.” Nor can it be possessed or made “mine.” Recognizing that our experience is neither me nor mine allows our intuitive intelligence to realize its own true nature.

Thought itself can be split into two categories, conceptualizing and image-making. For example, with our attention on the breath, as we practice noting, we have a concept of rising and falling and also a mental image of the abdomen. We do not try to destroy or obliterate the concept or the image. We just keep pointing our attention to the feeling of movement. As our attention to the sensation grows in strength, eventually it will take all the energy out of thinking until all that remains is the noting word.

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Thinking is an attempt to categorize. We see what we experience in light of what has happened in the past. That is why conceptual thought will not allow us to see things anew.

Now we have reached the second stage of development, *vicāra*. We are still noting, but instead of wandering off, our attention stays on the object. This second stage of developing right concentration is likened to a bee landing on a flower and gathering the pollen. If we continue to note, increasing our attention on the object and really feeling those sensations as they arise and pass away, all the energy will be drawn out of the thinking mind. It will stop.

Thinking is an attempt to categorize. We see what we experience in light of what has happened in the past. And what we have experienced in the past is filtered through the way we look at things now, our dispositions (*sankhara*). That is why conceptual thought will not allow us to see things anew. If we want to experience things as they are, conceptual thinking about those things must come to an end. When thinking stops, we are right there with what is happening. It is at that point that true vipassana consciousness, *samma sati*, right awareness, arises. Our intuitive intelligence, *pañña*, free of the distortion of thought and image, can finally begin to understand and see things as they are (*ñānadassana-yatha-bhutam*).

We don't have to worry about when to stop the noting. Once we have arrived at a high enough level of awareness and concentration, it will just stop. Such moments of pure vipassana, known as *khanika samadhi*, are usually of very short duration, but they have great potential for insight. With consistent practice, our experience eventually lengthens into a moment-to-moment concentrated awareness. Unlike absorption concentration (*arambana samadhi*), this state does not depend on a single object. It takes anything that arises within the mind—sensation, emotion, or thought—as its object, but for the purpose of seeing the three characteristics of existence (*lakkhana samadhi*). In other words, the concentration in vipassana is only there to support awareness (*sati*) and intuitive intelligence (*pañña*). This steady focus on and exploration of impermanence, dissatisfaction, and not-self are what finally lead us to liberation.

Some meditators have difficulty with noting. For instance, they might experience the word as very loud, which dominates their practice. This is simply a symptom that conceptual thinking is blocking intuitive intelligence. By patiently placing the attention on feelings, that intelligence will extricate itself from the conceptual mind. This new way of experiencing the world is often quite a discovery. Another common difficulty is finding the right word. We get caught in looking for just the word, as if we are writing a poem. But the simplest word, such as “feeling,” will do.

The activity of noting, of course, is not limited to the sitting posture. In the Mahasi technique we practice it continuously, from the moment we wake up until the moment we fall asleep. We abandon all hierarchy, thinking that sitting is more important than walking, which is more important than eating, and so on. The practice requires noting the day’s most seemingly insignificant actions, such as opening a door.

Not only do we note sensations, emotions, wandering mind, and actions but also that category of thought that we experience as intention. An intention is thought laced with desire. It is the instigator of all actions of body, speech, and thought. Not all desires are unskillful. To note an intention gives us the time to acknowledge it as either wholesome or unwholesome. It gives us the opportunity to let go of those intentions that we discern as leading to dissatisfaction and empower those that will lead to contentment, such as the desire to meditate.

Our discernment is rooted in the understanding of *kamma* (karma). The Buddha calls *kamma* the will (*cetana*). Will is the power to take something out of the realm of the potential and to actualize it. To realize an intention, we have to empower it. If we stand up and note our intention to walk, the foot will move, because will has translated that intention into an action, committing an act of *kamma*. When repeated, these actions create our habits. What we consider to be our personality is only a collection of habits that are driving us to our destiny. That is why noting intentions is such an essential component of progress toward liberation.

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Not all desires are unskillful. To note an intention gives us the time to acknowledge it as either wholesome or unwholesome.

The technique of noting, then, is a contrivance we use to begin to train the attention to stay on the presenting object and, more importantly, to trick the intellect into coming to a full stop. All that conceptual thinking is distorting the way the intuitive mind sees. Intellect knows only by way of categories, memory, and concepts. When we halt that process of conceiving and keep perception in its simplest form at the point of contact, this intuitive intelligence sees everything again as a child but with a meditator's understanding. Because we have primed that intelligence to observe the three characteristics, it can liberate itself from the

delusion of mistaken identity and its possession of the psycho-physical organism. This body, this heart, this mind, is not me, not mine, and do not in themselves constitute a self.

Going Slowly

In the *Discourse on How to Establish Mindfulness*, the Buddha discusses mindfully doing such things as looking, dressing, grooming, eating, and so on. Performing these actions slowly and deliberately sharpens our attentiveness and makes “the way things are” easier to perceive, much like slowing down a film. As we slow down a film, we see things we don’t usually see, like the flick of a frog’s tongue as it catches a fly. In the same way, the more we slow down movement, the more easily we perceive how the body, heart, and mind interact.

Progress of Insight

The Mahasi vipassana technique has the power to guide a meditator through the classic stages of the insight knowledges (*vipassana ñana*). These are the insights that lead to the first direct experience of nibbana, known as stream-entry (*sotapanna*). In the Theravada system, the whole process is repeated four times to attain the path and fruit of the once-returner (*sakadagami*), the non-returner (*anagami*), and the arahat, or enlightened being. Mahasi explains this process in clear detail in his book *The Progress of Insight*. ❀



Entering the Jhanas

Entering the jhanas is not easy—the harder you try, the more difficult it becomes. But as **Leigh Brasington** explains, you can make yourself ready for them to open up to you.

PERHAPS NO ASPECT of the Buddha’s teaching has been both more misunderstood and neglected than right concentration. Yet right concentration is obviously an integral part of the Buddha’s path to awakening: the final item of the noble eightfold path, it is exemplified by, and sometimes even defined as, the *jhanas*. Before his awakening, the Buddha remembered an incident from his childhood when he had experienced the first jhana; upon further reflection, he concluded, “That is indeed the path to awakening.”

The word *jhana* literally means “meditation”; it comes from the verb *jhayati*, which means “to meditate.” Many times, the Buddha would give a dhamma talk and close it by saying, “There are these roots of trees, these empty huts—go meditate (*jhayati*).” From this usage of *jhayati*, it seems certain that what the Buddha meant by meditation was jhana practice.

The Buddha's teachings can be divided into three parts: *sila*, *samadhi*, and *panna* (ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom). Or to put it into the vernacular: clean up your act, concentrate your mind, and use your concentrated mind to investigate reality. Each practice the Buddha taught fits neatly into one of the three categories. The precepts and the brahmavihara practices of loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity are ethical practices. The brahmavihara practices, especially loving-kindness (*metta*) practice, can also generate concentration, as do mantra and visualization practices. But most everything else you think of when you hear the word meditation is a wisdom practice, intended to help you “see the way things are” (or, perhaps more accurately, “what’s actually happening”). The Buddha makes it clear that this examination of reality should be done with a concentrated mind. And the jhanas are the method he taught, over and over again.

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The Buddha makes it clear that this examination of reality should be done with a concentrated mind. And the jhanas are the method he taught, over and over again.

The jhanas are eight altered states of consciousness, brought on via concentration, each yielding more concentration than the previous. As you pass through the jhanas, you stair-step your way

to deeper and deeper levels of concentration—that is, you become less and less likely to become distracted. Upon emerging from the jhanas—preferably the fourth or higher—you begin doing an insight practice with your jhanically concentrated, indistractable mind. This is the heart of the method the Buddha discovered. These states are not an end in and of themselves, unlike what the Buddha’s two teachers had taught him shortly after he’d left home to begin his spiritual quest. They are simply a way of preparing your mind so you can more effectively examine reality and discover the deeper truths that lead to liberation.

The path to entering the jhanas begins with what is called access concentration: being fully with the object of meditation and not becoming distracted even if there are wispy background thoughts. If your practice is *anapanasati*—mindfulness of breathing—you may recognize access concentration when the breath becomes very subtle; instead of a normal breath, you notice your breath has become very shallow. It may even seem that you’ve stopped breathing altogether. These are signs that you’ve likely arrived at access concentration. If the breath gets very shallow, and particularly if it feels like you’ve stopped breathing, the natural thing to do is to take a nice deep breath and get it going again. Wrong! This will tend to weaken your concentration. By taking that nice deep breath, you decrease the strength of your concentration. Just stay with that shallow breathing. It’s okay. You don’t need a lot of oxygen when you are very quiet both physically and mentally.

If the breath gets very, very subtle, instead of taking a deep breath, shift your attention away from the breath to a pleasant sensation. This is key. You notice the breath until you arrive at and sustain access concentration, then you let go of the breath and shift your attention to a pleasant sensation, preferably a physical one. There is not much point in trying to notice the breath that has gotten extremely subtle or has disappeared completely—there’s nothing left to notice.

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Look at most any statue of the Buddha—he has a faint smile on his face. That is not just for artistic purposes; it is there for teaching purposes.

The first question that may arise when I say, “Shift your attention to a pleasant sensation” may be “What pleasant sensation?” Well, it turns out that when you get to access concentration, the odds are quite strong that, someplace in your physical being, there will be a pleasant sensation. Look at most any statue of the Buddha—he has a faint smile on his face. That is not just for artistic purposes; it is there for teaching purposes. Smile when you meditate, because once you reach access concentration, you only have to shift your attention one inch to find a pleasant sensation.

Pleasant sensations can occur pretty much anywhere. The most common place that people find pleasant sensations when they’ve established access concentration is in the hands. When you meditate, you want to put your hands in a comfortable

position in which you can just leave them. The traditional posture is one hand holding the other, with the thumbs lightly touching. But you can also put your hands in all sorts of other positions—just place them however it appeals to you. After you’ve been in access concentration “long enough,” if you notice that there’s a pleasant feeling in the hands, drop the attention on the breath and focus entirely on the pleasantness of that sensation.

Another common place where people find a pleasant sensation is in the heart center, particularly if they’re using metta, or loving-kindness, meditation as the access method. Just shift your attention to the pleasantness of that sensation. Other places people find pleasant sensations could include the third eye, the top of the head, or the shoulders. It does not matter where the pleasant sensation manifests; what matters is that there is a pleasant sensation and you’re able to put your attention on it and—now here comes the really hard part—do nothing else.

It’s important to let go of the breath when you make the shift to the pleasant sensation. The breath (or other meditation object) is the key to get you in—“in” being synonymous with establishing strong enough access concentration. When you come home from work, you pull out your key, you open the door to your home, and you go in. You don’t then wander around with the key still in your hand—you put it back in your pocket or purse or on some table. You’re not cooking dinner or watching TV with the key still in your hand. The key has done its job, and you let it go. It’s exactly the same with the breath or other meditation object. Totally let go of

it, and focus entirely on the pleasant sensation. Of course, this is easier said than done—you've struggled for a long time to stay locked onto the breath, and now that you've finally managed to do so, the first thing you are told is to stop doing that. But that's the way it is. If you want to experience jhanas, it's going to be necessary to give yourself to fully enjoying the pleasantness of the pleasant sensation.

Once you've found the pleasant sensation, you fully shift your attention to it. If you can do that, the sensation will begin to grow in intensity; it will become stronger. This will not happen in a linear way. At first, nothing happens. Then it'll grow a little bit and then hang out and grow a little bit more. And then eventually, it will suddenly take off and take you into what is obviously an altered state of consciousness.

In this altered state of consciousness, you will be overcome with rapture, euphoria, ecstasy, delight. These are all English words that are used to translate the Pali word *piti*. Perhaps the best English word for *piti* is "glee." *Piti* is a primarily physical sensation that sweeps you powerfully into an altered state. But *piti* is not solely physical; as the suttas say, "On account of the presence of *piti*, there is mental exhilaration." In addition to the physical energy and mental exhilaration, the *piti* will be accompanied by an emotional sensation of joy and happiness. The Pali word for this joy/happiness is *sukha*, the opposite of *dukkha* (pain, suffering). And if you can remain undistractedly focused on this experience of *piti* and *sukha*, that is the first *jhana*.

So to summarize the method for entering the first jhana: You sit in a comfortable upright position and generate access concentration by placing, and eventually maintaining, your attention on a single meditation object. When access concentration is firmly established, then you shift your attention from the breath (or whatever your meditation object is) to a pleasant sensation, preferably a physical sensation. You put your attention on that sensation, maintain your attention on it, and do nothing else.

The hard part is the “do nothing else” part. You put your attention on the pleasant sensation and nothing happens, so you might think to yourself, “He said something was supposed to happen.” No, I did not say to make comments about experiencing the pleasant sensation. Or you might put your attention on the pleasant sensation and it starts to increase, so you think, “Oh! Oh! Something’s happening!” No, don’t do that—that will only make it go away. Or it comes up just a little bit, and then it stops, and you sort of try and help it. Nope, none of this works. Just simply observe the pleasant sensation.

You must become totally immersed in the pleasantness of the pleasant sensation. By this I mean the quality of the sensation that enables you to determine that it is pleasant, rather than unpleasant or neither. It’s not about the location of the pleasant sensation nor its intensity or duration. It’s not about whether the pleasant sensation is increasing or decreasing or staying the same. Just focus entirely on the pleasant aspect of the pleasant sensation, and the jhana will arise on its own. Now, admittedly, the sensation will be

located in a particular area, and your attention will be aimed at that area. That's fine. Just don't get caught up in the location; stay with just enjoying the pleasantness of the pleasant sensation.

All you can do is set up the conditions for the jhana to arise by cultivating a calm and quiet mind focused on pleasantness. And then just let go—be that calm, quiet mind focused on pleasantness and enjoy it—and the jhana will appear. Any attempt to do anything more does not work. You actually have to become a human being, as opposed to a human doing. You have to become a being that is simply focused on a pleasant sensation, and then the jhana comes all on its own.

Imagine that your mind is like a still pool—still because of the access concentration. Now drop in a pebble of pleasure. The ripples go out to the sides of your skull, bounce off, and come back together. When they come together they reinforce each other, generating taller waves. But because this is not a real, physical system, if you don't disturb the system, the ripples stay taller and don't die out; they keep bouncing off the sides and reinforcing each other more and more. This is what we are after. But it requires that you not stir the water in the pool; doing so would spoil the bouncing and reinforcing effect, and the system would not keep generating higher waves.

The suttas describe the first jhana as being “accompanied by thinking and examining” and “filled with the rapture and happiness born of seclusion.” These four qualities are often identified as factors of the first jhana: thinking and examining, rapture and

happiness. The thinking and examining are translations of the Pali words *vitakka* and *vicara*. The commentaries interpret these words to mean initial and sustained attention on the meditation object. Now, it's true that in order to do any sort of concentrated meditation, you need initial and sustained attention on the meditation object. However, this doesn't appear to be what the Buddha is talking about: in the suttas, *vitakka* and *vicara* always and only refer to thinking. When you generate access concentration and sustain it, there may still be a bit of thinking in the background, which can basically be ignored. This background thinking persists in the first jhana and is what is being referred to by the words *vitakka* and *vicara*.

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There's an unmistakable quality to the arising of piti and sukha that lets you know for certain that something quite different is happening.

As stated earlier, when you move from access concentration to the first jhana, you're shifting your attention to a pleasant sensation and staying with that as your object of attention, ignoring any background thinking. If you can stay with your undistracted attention on the pleasant sensation, then piti will arise. The piti, being the physical release of pleasant, exhilarating energy, could be anywhere from mild to quite intense. It can be finger-in-the-electrical-socket intense; it can be so intense that it's not even pleasurable. And hopefully the piti is accompanied by sukha,

which is an emotional state of joy and happiness. Both piti and sukha are required in order for the experience to be classified as the first jhana. And most likely, the experience brings a big grin to your face. The first jhana is enough of an altered state that if you think some experience might be the first jhana, it probably isn't; there's an unmistakable quality to the arising of piti and sukha that lets you know for certain that something quite different is happening.

At first, it's really not easy to tell the piti and sukha apart. This experience, this energy, this state comes over you and grabs your full attention. It is not readily apparent that there is an emotional component apart from the physical component, nor is it necessary to do so yet. The experience may be much more one of pervasive piti-sukha than one composed of intermingled distinct piti and distinct sukha. As mentioned above, you may also find that there is a bit of thinking going on in the background. That's okay—it's the vitakka and vicara, the thinking and examining, which are still lurking in the background of the first jhana. Don't get distracted by the background thinking; stay focused on the experience of piti-sukha. Maintaining this piti-sukha experience and the focus on it constitutes the first jhana.

For each of the first four jhanas, we have a simile. For this first one we find:

Suppose a skilled bath attendant or his apprentice were to pour soap flakes into a metal basin, sprinkle them with water and knead them into a ball, so that the ball of soap flakes would be pervaded

by moisture, encompassed by moisture, suffused by moisture inside and out and yet would not trickle. In the same way, one drenches, steeps, saturates, and suffuses one's body with the rapture and happiness born of seclusion, so that there is no part of one's body that is not suffused by rapture and happiness. (DN 2.78)

This picture matches quite well the frenetic energy of the first jhana. The first jhana is not a calm, peaceful state. Its energy is pretty intense, and this simile gives a fairly good idea of the lack of calm and of the frenetic energy that is present. There's an effervescent quality to the first jhana that can also be gleaned from the simile. The particulars of the simile are that the soap flakes are like your body, and the water is like the piti and sukha, which go throughout the body so that they are fully everywhere; this occurs as you become more skilled. Your first goal should be to get the piti and sukha going, and then sustain them.

The length of time you'll want to stay in the first jhana is inversely proportional to the intensity of the piti. In other words, if the piti is very strong, you probably won't want to stay there very long. Half a minute or so might be sufficient, maybe even less than that if the piti is seriously intense. If the piti is not so strong, you might want to stay there five to ten minutes. The timing depends on the strength of the piti.

Piti comes in a number of "grades." It can show up as momentary piti, which is like a shiver and then it's gone. It can be minor piti, which is a little tingly feeling that's sustaining but not very strong and is more or less in the background. Minor piti can also

show up as gentle, involuntary rocking as you meditate. You might experience showering piti, which is when you get a burst of piti and then it's gone, another burst and then that's gone—the piti is arising but not sustaining. It can be uplifting piti that makes your hair stand on end. It can give you a sense that you are levitating when it's really strong. I have had several students report opening their eyes to see whether they were indeed levitating. I'm afraid no one has ever reported getting off the ground. However, uplifting piti can make you sit up very straight. The fifth kind of piti is what I usually refer to as full-blown piti. The correct translation is “all-pervasive piti.” This is the piti that is everywhere. It's present, it's sustained, and you experience it throughout your body. It's the piti necessary for the first jhana; the other four types are pre-jhana piti, and they may or may not show up as you progress toward access concentration and then to the arising of the first jhana.

Piti can manifest as rocking or swaying, or it can be intense so that you are actually vibrating to the point where it is visible to others. It can manifest as heat and get very, very warm. Hopefully it has a pleasant aspect to it. Most often, it manifests as an upward rush of energy, often centered up the spine. I've talked with people who practice kundalini yoga, and it seems that piti is the same energy. I've talked with people who practice *tummo*, the Tibetan practice of generating heat, and I was told that this practice also

involves generating the same sort of energy. It's a known, widespread phenomenon that is used in different ways. Here, it is used to grab your attention and take you into a concentrated state. The arising of piti also has the nice side effect (for most people) of generating sukha, and, as one comes to see, sukha is the principal component of the second and third jhanas.

So, you hang out in the first jhana for a bit, depending on how strong the piti is: if it is very strong, a half minute or so; if it is weaker, then maybe up to five or ten minutes. It should also be mentioned that when piti first arrives, you may not have any control over the strength of it. It may come on ridiculously strong, or it may come on weak. Just go with whatever shows up. The reason it can come on very strong the first time is somewhat like a can of soda pop. If you shake it for four or five days and then pop the top, it goes all over. The good news is that the next time piti comes on, it won't have built up so much pressure. If the first time you experience piti is in the evening before going to bed, you will probably have trouble getting to sleep. It will wire you up. That's okay. You're learning, and missing a little bit of sleep is worth figuring out how to work with these valuable mental states.

These are the instructions for entering the first jhana. But don't expect the necessary concentration to show up anytime soon. In fact, don't expect anything! Expectations are the absolute

worst things you can bring on a retreat, and they are equally detrimental when practicing while not on retreat. Simply do the meditation method. And when access concentration arises, recognize it, sustain it “long enough,” and then shift your attention to a pleasant sensation. Don’t try to do the jhanas. You can’t. All you can do is generate the conditions out of which the jhanas can arise. Recognize when you’ve established these conditions, then patiently wait for the jhana to come find you. ✧

Adapted from *Right Concentration: A Practical Guide to the Jhanas*, by Leigh Brasington (Shambhala Publications, 2015)



The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Insight Meditation teacher **Joseph Goldstein** examines a key teaching from the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha’s discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness, which he called the direct path to liberation.

THE SIMPLE, ALTHOUGH not always easy, practices of vipassana are all rooted in one important discourse of the Buddha: the *Satipatthana Sutta*. *Satipatthana* is often translated as “foundation of mindfulness,” but another, and perhaps more helpful, translation is “way of establishing mindfulness.” Traditionally, there are four: mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind, and dhammas. In terms of awareness of the different aspects of our experience, the slight shift in translation—from “foundation” to “way”—has important implications: it gives more emphasis to the process of awareness itself, rather than to the particular objects of our attention.

There is an element of the *Satipatthana Sutta* that stands out by virtue of the frequency of its repetition. It is a refrain that occurs thirteen different times in the discourse, following each of the specific meditation instructions pertaining to the four foundations of mindfulness.

In this way, in regard to the body [feelings, mind, dhammas] one abides contemplating the body [feelings, mind, dhammas] internally, or one abides contemplating [each] externally, or one abides contemplating [each] both internally and externally. One abides contemplating the nature of arising in the body [feelings, mind, dhammas]... the nature of passing away in [each]... or the nature of both arising and passing away in [each]. Mindfulness that “there is a body” [feelings, mind, dhammas] is established in one to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And one abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how in regard to the body [feelings, mind, dhammas] one abides contemplating [each].

Through the repetition of the refrain, the Buddha reminds us again and again of the essential aspects of the practice:

Contemplating our experience internally, externally, and both;

Contemplating the nature of impermanence: the arising, the passing away, and both the arising and passing away in regard to our experience;

Establishing enough mindfulness to recognize simply what is unfolding moment to moment—without mental commentary— and to remain mindful of what’s happening;

Abiding without clinging to anything that enters our realm of experience.

In the sutta, the refrain first appears after the instructions on the breath. For this reason, and for the sake of efficiency, the examples that follow focus on the body. As you read, however, bear in

mind that the important and explicit elements of practice outlined in the refrain apply as well to all the aspects of our experience mentioned in the other three foundations of mindfulness: feelings, mind, and dhammas.

Internally and Externally

Contemplating the body internally seems obvious; it is mostly how we practice. It is the present moment awareness of what arises in the body. It might be the sensations of the breath or of different sensations arising throughout the body, such as heat or cold, tightness or pressure. But what does contemplating the body externally mean? There are some interesting aspects here that meditation practitioners don't often make explicit.

Contemplating the body externally can mean being mindful of the bodily actions of others when they draw our attention. Instead of our usual tendency to judge or react when we see other people doing something, we can rest in the simple mindfulness of what the other person is doing. We can be mindful that they are walking or eating, without getting lost in our own thoughts of how fast or slow, mindful or careless they might be. An ironic and useless pattern that I've noticed on my own retreats is that my mind comments on someone not being mindful—or at least not appearing to be in my eyes—all the while being oblivious to the fact that in that very moment I'm doing exactly what it is I have a judgment about: namely, not being mindful! It usually doesn't take me long to see the absurdity of this pattern and then just to smile at these habits

of mind. It's always helpful to have a sense of humor about one's own mental foibles. By practicing this simple external mindfulness, we protect our own minds from the various defilements that might arise.

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Have you noticed that when you're mindful of someone else moving very carefully, without distraction, that you yourself become more concentrated? This is one reason the Buddha suggested that we associate with those who are mindful and concentrated: it's contagious.

Although attending to the breath is mostly internal, the instruction to be mindful of the body externally could be particularly helpful on retreat when someone else's breath may be loud and disturbing. At those times, being mindful of another's breath—whether it is in or out, long or short—can actually be part of our own path to awakening.

Being mindful of the body externally has another advantage. Have you noticed that when you're mindful of someone else moving very carefully, without distraction, that you yourself become more concentrated? This is one reason the Buddha suggested that we associate with those who are mindful and concentrated: it's contagious. In this way, our own practice becomes a real offering to our fellow practitioners.

The last part of this instruction is to contemplate both internally and externally. The German bhikkhu and scholar Analayo suggested that this is not just a simple repetition, but rather reflects a more profound understanding that we should contemplate experience without considering it to be part of one's own experience or that of another, but just as an objective experience in itself. Being mindful internally, externally, and both reminds us of the comprehensive nature of mindfulness practice—to be aware of whatever there is, whether it is within us or without. And, in the end, to go beyond this division altogether.

Arising and Passing Away

The second part of the refrain tells us to abide contemplating the nature of arising, the nature of passing away, and the nature of both with each object of awareness. Ledi Sayadaw, one of the great Burmese meditation masters and scholars, said that not seeing arising and passing away is ignorance, while seeing all phenomena as impermanent is the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening. The Buddha emphasized the importance of this in many different ways.

Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust, all lust for existence, it eliminates all ignorance, it uproots the conceit, "I am." Better than one hundred years lived without seeing the arising and passing of things is one day lived seeing their arising and passing.

—*The Dhammapada*, translated by Gil Fronsdal

What does this say about what we value and work for in our lives, and of the liberating effect of seeing directly—in the moment and for ourselves—the truth of change?

Ananda, the Buddha’s cousin and attendant for many years, was once recounting the wonderful qualities of the Buddha. The Buddha, referring to himself as the Tathagata (“one thus gone”), said in reply:

That being so, Ananda, remember this too as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Tathagata. For the Tathagata, feelings are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear. Perceptions are known as they arise, are present, and disappear. Thoughts are known as they arise, are present, and disappear. Remember this too, Ananda, as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Tathagata.

— *The Middle Length Discourses* 123:22, translated by Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi

Understanding deeply the truth of impermanence—not as a concept, but in direct experience—opens the doorway to ever-deepening insight. In the Buddha’s first teaching on selflessness to the group of five ascetics, he goes through each of the five aggregates—material elements, feelings, perceptions, formations, and consciousness—pointing out the impermanence of each and how that which is impermanent is inherently unreliable and unsatisfying. And that which is unreliable and unsatisfying cannot truly be considered to be “I” or “mine.” In just hearing this teaching, all five ascetics became enlightened.

How does this happen? What is the liberating power of this teaching? When we see deeply that all that is subject to arising is also subject to cessation, that whatever arises will also pass away, the mind becomes disenchanted. Becoming disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. And through dispassion, the mind is liberated.

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Understanding deeply the truth of impermanence—not as a concept, but in direct experience—opens the doorway to ever-deepening insight.

It's telling that in English, the words *disenchanted*, *disillusioned*, and *dispassionate* often have negative connotations. But looking more closely at their meaning reveals their connection to freedom. Becoming disenchanted means breaking the spell of enchantment, waking up into a fuller and greater reality. It is the happy ending of so many great myths and fairy tales. Disillusioned is not the same as being discouraged or disappointed. It is a reconnection with what is true, free of illusion. And dispassionate does not mean “indifferent” or “apathetic.” Rather, it is the mind of great openness and equanimity, free of grasping.

Contemplating Impermanence

A sustained contemplation of impermanence leads to a shift in the way we experience reality. We see through the illusions of stable existence, in both what is perceived and what is perceiving. It radically reshapes our understanding of ourselves and the world. How can we practice this contemplation?

We can be mindful of impermanence on many levels. Wisdom arises when we pay attention to impermanence in ways we may already know but often overlook. There are the very obvious changes in nature: climate change, daily weather patterns, evolution, and extinction of species. On the collective level, there are large-scale changes in society: the rise and fall of civilizations and cultures. On the personal level, people are born, and they die.

Walking through the woods in New England, we often come across miles of stone walls and old stone foundations, with trees now growing up through them. What stories took place here? What lives as vivid as our own? What is left? We see the changing experience of our relationships or work, and most intimately, of our bodies and minds.

Given all these examples of change that are before us all the time, it is striking that we often still find the changes in our lives surprising. Somehow we count on things staying a certain way, or at least, if they are going to change, changing to our liking.

When we pay careful attention, we see that everything is disappearing and new things are arising not only each day or hour but in every moment. When we leave our house, or simply walk from one room to another, can we notice this flow of changing experience—the flow of visual forms as we move, different sounds, changing sensations in the body, fleeting thoughts of images? What happens to each of these experiences? Do they last? The truth of their changing nature is so ordinary that we have mostly stopped noticing it at all.



When we pay careful attention, we see that everything is disappearing and new things are arising not only each day or hour but in every moment.

As mindfulness and concentration get stronger, we more clearly and deeply see impermanence on microscopic levels. We see for ourselves that what appears solid and stable is really insubstantial and in constant flux. The perception of change becomes so rapid that in the very moment of noticing an object, it's already disappearing. At this point, people sometimes feel that their mindfulness is weak because things are not lasting long enough for our attention to land on them. But this is simply a refinement of the perception of change. We really begin to see that, on one level, there's nothing much there.

As a meditation exercise, particularly in sitting, it is sometimes helpful to notice what aspect of impermanence is most predominant. Are we seeing new things arise even before the last one has ended? Are we seeing the endings more clearly and not seeing the moment of an object arising? Or do we see both the arising and passing away of objects equally? It's not that any one of these perspectives is the right one. In the course of our practice, sometimes it is one way, sometimes another. Noticing how we perceive change is simply another way to refine our attention.

In one discourse, the Buddha makes the distinction between the establishment of mindfulness, which is the simple awareness of what is present, and the development of the establishment of mindfulness. In this development stage, the awareness of impermanence becomes even more predominant than the object itself. It is the beginning of movement from mindfulness of content to mindfulness of process. It is this stage of satipatthana that leads to wisdom and awakening, because if any aspect of experience is still seen as permanent, then opening to the unconditioned, nibbana, is impossible.

This understanding is not limited to monks or nuns. Many laypeople, from the Buddha's time up until the present, have experienced profound stages of enlightenment. The Buddha addresses this possibility in a conversation with the lay disciple Mahanama:

Here, Mahanama, a lay follower is wise, possessing wisdom directed to arising and passing away, which is noble, and penetrative, leading to the complete destruction of suffering. In that way a lay follower is accomplished in wisdom.

—*The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* 55:37, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi

Bare Knowing and the Continuity of Mindfulness

The next line of the refrain says, “Mindfulness that ‘there is a body’ is established in one to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness.” As Analayo notes, bare knowledge here means observing objectively without getting lost in associations and reactions. It’s the simple and direct knowing of what’s present without making up stories about experience. This “seeing clearly” is, in fact, the meaning of the Pali word *vipassana*, usually translated as “insight meditation.”

We often miss the simplicity of bare knowledge because we look through it—or over it—for something special, or we look forward in expectation and miss what is right in front of us. There is a story of Mulla Nazruddin, a crazy-wisdom teaching figure in the Sufi tradition. It seems that the Mulla was engaged in trade between his home city and the neighboring country. The customs officials at the border suspected that he was smuggling something, but whenever they examined his saddlebags, they

could never find anything of value. Finally, one day, a friend asked Mulla how he was becoming wealthy. He replied, “I’m smuggling donkeys.”

Sometimes we obscure the experience of bare knowing because we are conflating simple awareness with some unnoticed attachment or aversion to what is happening. This can happen when the various hindrances are strong or when there are subtler attachments to pleasant meditative states. In following the instructions of the refrain, we need to establish mindfulness to the extent necessary for this bare knowing of what’s arising and for its continuity moment to moment.

The Momentum of Mindfulness

The continuity of mindfulness spoken of in the sutta is established in two ways. First, it comes about through the momentum of previous moments of mindfulness. Whatever we repeatedly practice begins to arise more and more spontaneously; at this point, the mindfulness arises by itself. From the repeated effort to be mindful in the moment, there comes a time when the flow of mindfulness happens effortlessly for longer periods of time.

There is an early insight into the nature of the mind-body process that both comes from this continuity of mindfulness and also strengthens it: it is the understanding through one’s own experience that in every moment, knowing and its object arise simultaneously. There is the inbreath and the simultaneous knowing of it,

the out-breath and the knowing of it. A visual object arises, and in that very moment there is the knowing of it. This is true of every aspect of our experience.

“

In meditation, as we go from painful sensations to pleasant ones, we see that the basic quality of knowing is not altered—it is simply aware of what is arising.

This insight is the first doorway into the understanding of selflessness, and in the stages of insight, it is called purification of view. We begin to see that everything that we call self is simply this pairwise progression of knowing and object, arising and passing moment after moment. And we also see that the knowing in each moment arises due to impersonal causes and not because there is some abiding “knower.” So we can say that knowing (consciousness) arises spontaneously when the appropriate causes and conditions are present. Going even deeper, we see that the knowing faculty is not altered or affected by what is known, and this realization has liberating consequences for both our meditation practice and our lives. In meditation, as we go from painful sensations to pleasant ones, we see that the basic quality of knowing is not altered—it is simply aware of what is arising. One example of the profound consequences of this understanding is the

description of Henry David Thoreau's last days. He died of tuberculosis at the early age of forty-four. In a biography of his life, his friends described his frame of mind.

Henry was never affected, never reached by [his illness]. ...Very often I heard him tell his visitors that he enjoyed existence as well as ever. He remarked to me that there was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health, the mind always conforming to the condition of the body. The thought of death, he said, could not begin to trouble him. ...

During his long illness, I never heard a murmur escape him, or the slightest wish expressed to remain with us; his perfect contentment was truly wonderful...

Some of his more orthodox friends and relatives tried to prepare him for death, but with little satisfaction to themselves... [W]hen his Aunt Louisa asked him if he had made his peace with God, he answered, "I did not know we had ever quarreled, Aunt."

—*The Days of Henry David Thoreau*, by Walter Harding

We build this momentum of mindfulness very simply. We can start with some primary object of attention, such as mindfulness of the breath or the sitting posture. Using a particular object to focus and calm the mind is common to many spiritual traditions. St. Frances de Sales wrote, "If the heart wanders or is distracted, bring it back to the point quite gently. ... And even if you did nothing in the whole of your hour but bring your heart back—though it went away every time you brought it back—your hour would be very well employed."

When the mind has settled a bit, we can then begin paying attention to any other object that becomes more predominant. It might be sensations in the body, or sounds, or different thoughts and images arising in the mind. And as the mindfulness gains strength, we sometimes let go of the primary object altogether and practice a more choiceless awareness, simply being aware of whatever arises moment to moment. At this point, as the awareness becomes more panoramic, we move from emphasis on the content of the particular experience to its more general characteristics—namely, the impermanence, unreliability, and selflessness of all that arises. All of this strengthens the continuity of mindfulness through mindfulness itself.

Perception

The second way we strengthen continuity is through the mental factor of perception. In the Abhidhamma, strong perception is one of the proximate causes for mindfulness to arise. Perception is the mental quality of recognition. It picks out the distinguishing marks of a particular object and then employs a concept—red or blue, man or woman—to store it in memory for future reference. For example, we hear a sound. Consciousness simply knows the sound; perception recognizes it, names it “a bird,” and then remembers this concept for the next time we hear that kind of sound. It’s not that the word bird will always come to mind when we hear the sound, but there will still be a preverbal recognition that the sound is the call of a bird.

All this raises an interesting question regarding the use of concepts in meditation practice and understanding. On the one hand, we want to establish mindfulness to the extent necessary for bare knowing, which somehow suggests a mind free from conceptual overlay. And on the other hand, the factor of perception, with its attendant concepts, is itself a proximate cause for mindfulness to arise.

The resolution of these apparently contradictory perspectives lies in our deeper understanding of perception. Perception is a common factor, which means that it is arising in every moment of consciousness. When perception is operative without strong mindfulness—the usual way an untrained mind navigates the world—then we know and remember only the surface appearance of things. In the moment of recognition, we give a name or a concept to what arises, and then our experiences become limited, obscured, or colored by those very concepts.

As an example of the limiting potential of perceptions, years ago a friend told me of an incident that happened with his six-year-old son, Kevin, in school. The teacher asked a very simple question:

“What color is an apple?” Different pupils answered “red,” “green,” or “golden.” But Kevin said “white.” A bit of an exchange took place, with the teacher trying to guide Kevin’s response to a correct answer. But Kevin was adamant, and finally, in some frustration, he said, “When you cut open any apple, it’s always white inside.”

Perception can be in the service of greater mindfulness and awareness. Instead of concepts limiting our view of what's arising, properly employed, they can frame the moment's experience, enabling a deeper and more careful observation. It is like putting a frame around a painting in order to see it more clearly. A Buddhist monk named Nanananda spoke of "rallying the concepts for the higher purpose of developing wisdom, whereby concepts themselves are transcended."

Mental Noting

The notion of rallying concepts for developing wisdom underlies the purpose of the meditative technique of *mental noting*. This technique uses a word—or sometimes a short phrase—to acknowledge what is arising. The mental note or label—such as “in,” “out,” “in,” “out,” “thinking,” “heaviness,” “in,” “out,” “restlessness”—supports clear recognition (perception), which itself strengthens both mindfulness in the moment and the momentum of continuity. Or, as Ajahn Sumedho, one of the first Western disciples of Ajahn Chah, the great Thai master, expressed it: “The breath is like this”; “Pain is like this”; “Calm is like this.”

Noting can serve the practice in other ways as well. The very tone of the note in the mind can often illuminate unconscious attitudes. We may not be aware of impatience or frustration or delight as we experience different arising objects, but we may start to notice an agitated or enthusiastic tone of voice in the

mind. Noting helps cut through our identification with experience, both when the hindrances are present and when our practice has become very subtle and refined.

Mental noting also gives us important feedback: Are we really present or not, in a continuous or sustained way? Are we practicing to make our sittings— or the day—genuinely seamless? Do we understand the difference between being casual and relaxed in our application of mindfulness? We shouldn't confuse this strong intention to be aware with grimness. We can practice continuity of mindfulness with the grace of tai chi or a Japanese tea ceremony, simply taking care even with the small daily activities of our lives. This continuity is important because it builds the momentum of energy necessary to realize nibbana.

It's important to realize that this tool of mental noting is simply a skillful means for helping us be mindful; it is not the essence of the practice itself, which is simply to be aware. There are many Buddhist traditions that do not use this technique. But it is worth experimenting with, even for short periods of time, to see whether it is indeed helpful for your practice or not. We should also understand its limitations. Noting is not used as an intellectual reflection and should be kept to a single, silent word. David Kalupahana, a renowned Buddhist scholar, wrote, "Concepts used for satipatthana are to be pursued only to the point where they produce knowledge, and not beyond, for conceptions carried

beyond their limits can lead to substantialist metaphysics.” Taking concepts too far simply solidifies our view of reality, and we get boxed in by mental constructs of our own making.

As mindfulness gets stronger, we might become aware of too many things to label, with objects changing so quickly that there’s not even time to note. In this situation, we are noticing more than we note, and the labels themselves start to fall away. When awareness is well established and mindfulness is happening by itself—what we could call *effortless effort*—then we can simply rest in the continuity of bare knowing. Ryokan, a nineteenth-century Zen master, poet, and wandering monk, expressed it this way: “Know your mind just as it is.”

Abiding Independent

The last line of the *Satipatthana* refrain unifies the practice of meditation with its goal: “And one abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.” This line encapsulates the entire path.

“Abiding independent” refers to the mind not being attached to any arising experience, either through craving or views. “Craving” or “desire” are the usual translations of the Pali word *tanha*. But *tanha* is also sometimes translated as “thirst,” and somehow this translation conveys the more embodied urgency of this powerful state of mind. It keeps us in a state of dependency both in our meditation practice and in our lives.

One of the great discoveries as we proceed along the path is that, on one level, birth and death, existence and nonexistence, self and other, are the great defining themes of our lives. And on another level, we come to understand that all experience is just a show of empty appearances. This understanding points to the other aspect of “abiding independent, not clinging to anything in the world”—that is, not being attached through views and, most fundamentally, the view of self.

In our normal mode of perception, when we see, hear, smell, taste, or touch, or when we cognize things through the mind, there immediately arises a false sense of “I” and “mine”: “I’m seeing”; “I’m hearing.” Then we elaborate further: “I’m meditating,” with the corollaries “I’m a good (or bad) meditator” or “I’m a good (or bad) person.” We build a whole superstructure of self on top of momentary, changing conditions.

The Bahiya Sutta

In one short and liberating teaching, the *Bahiya Sutta*, or the *Discourse to Bahiya*, the Buddha pointed the way to freedom from this dependence through views of self. In the time of the Buddha, as the story goes, Bahiya was shipwrecked on the southern coast of India. He had lost everything, even his clothes, and so covered himself with the bark of trees. People who were passing by took him for a great ascetic and began to honor him as an *arahant*, a fully enlightened being. Bahiya soon came to believe it himself.

After some years of this, former companions who were now devas (celestial beings) appeared to him, saying that not only was he not an arahant, but he was not even on the path to becoming one. Bahiya, quite distressed by this news, but also very sincere in his aspirations, asked what he should do. The devas replied that there was a Buddha, a fully enlightened being, who lived in northern India and that Bahiya should seek him out.

Bahiya finally met the Buddha while the latter was going from house to house on alms rounds. Bahiya requested teachings right then and there. The Buddha replied that it was not an appropriate time and that Bahiya should come see him at the monastery. But Bahiya requested teachings a second and then a third time: “Lord, you may die. I may die. Please teach me now.” The Buddha, impressed with Bahiya’s sincerity and urgency, then spoke these words:

In the seen there is only the seen, in the heard, there is only the heard, in the sensed [smell, taste, and touch], there is only the sensed, in the cognized, there is only the cognized: This, Bahiya, is how you should train yourself.

When, Bahiya, there is for you in the seen only the seen, in the heard only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized, then, Bahiya, there is no “you” in connection with all that.

When, Bahiya, there is no “you” in connection with that, there is no “you” there.

When, Bahiya, there is no “you” there, then, Bahiya, you are neither here nor there nor in between the two.

This, just this, is the end of suffering.

With this quality of bare knowing of whatever is seen, heard, felt, or cognized, we are not evaluating or proliferating different sense impressions. When we practice in this way, we live abiding independent, not clinging to anything in the world. ❁

Excerpted from *Mindfulness: Six Guided Practices for Awakening* © 2013 by Joseph Goldstein. Reprinted with permission of Sounds True.



Get Very, Very Close

Sayadaw U Pandita's instructions for satipatthana vipassana.

OUR MEDITATIVE TRADITION was founded by the late Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw of Rangoon. According to his instructions, *sati-patthana vipassana*, also known as insight meditation, is the primary teaching. Discourses on metta are also offered, though far less often. This is because insight wisdom has the capacity to liberate the mind by seeing the Dhamma directly.

Unfortunately, however, not everyone can practice high-level satipatthana vipassana. It is a demanding practice, suitable for a minority of exceptional people.

The benefits to be gained from this type of meditation, furthermore, are primarily for oneself. Others do benefit, but this happens somewhat indirectly. Since metta is easier for most people to develop and it benefits everyone, the practice of loving-kindness really ought to become widespread. But if we undertake the practice of metta, we must never lose sight of the unique possibilities offered by vipassana meditation.

Basic Instructions for Satipatthana Vipassana Meditation

Posture

Any basic sitting posture is all right, whether the legs are crossed or folded. One can be sitting in a chair, but if so, the back should not be supported. The body should be as upright as possible and the eyes should be closed (unless you are drowsy).

Primary Object

The main object of awareness is the natural breath, as it is. Do not try to control the breath in any way; simply allow it to come and go while closely observing what happens in the area of the abdomen. The rising of the abdomen along with the in-breath, and the falling of the abdomen along with the out-breath, will consist of a variety of sensations and experiences. All of these should be noticed as continuously as possible. Let there be no gaps in your attention.

The observation of any object has three parts:

1. Occurrence: attention should arrive quickly, as close to the arising of the object as possible.
2. Labeling and observation: label the rising movement as “rising,” and the falling as “falling.” Observation should be careful and diligent, the label gentle and simple. It is not necessary to form elaborate concepts of what is going on. Labeling merely identifies the event and serves to direct the mind toward it.

3. Knowing the nature: in the rising and falling of the abdomen, one knows the sensations as they are. In the rising, for example, there are likely to be sensations of tension, tightness, stiffness, and hardness. There can also be vibration and movement.

It is not possible to observe the rising and falling continuously for a very long time. Other objects will arise; when they do, it is often recommended to move the attention away from the breath.

How to Deal with Other Objects

Numerous other objects can be the focus of attention:

1. *Eventually the mind wanders.* When this happens, shift attention to the wandering and take it as a new object. Label it, but do not get attached to the content of the thoughts. This is very important. The thoughts may disappear right away, in which case you return to the rising and falling. The thoughts may also seem great and fascinating, or else horribly absorbing. No matter how thoughts appear, all of them resemble soap bubbles. Try not to jump onto a train of thoughts and get completely lost!

If the wandering mind persists and you become thoroughly absorbed and distracted, cut off your involvement in thinking and return to the sensations at the abdomen.

Minor or background thinking is to be ignored.

2. *Pain will arise in the body.* When these sensations become predominant, let go of the rising and falling. Label the pain as “pain, pain” and observe it for a while. Label it again.

There are four things to be known about physical pain: its quality or characteristic—for example, it may be burning, stabbing, piercing, tearing; its intensity—it may increase, remain the same, or decrease; its location—it may stay put, vanish, spread, or move; and its duration—it may last for a short moment or for an entire sitting, or it may blink on and off.



Remember that the purpose of paying attention to pain is to know its nature, not to heal it or make it go away.

Remember that the purpose of paying attention to pain is to know its nature, not to heal it or make it go away. Sometimes pain will disappear or change under close observation; on the other hand, its intensity may well increase.

Any such changes are to be registered.

Facing strong pain calls for patience and determination. Don't change your posture; instead, try to know the pain more deeply. Changing one's posture weakens concentration. If pain becomes excruciating, though, it is okay to move as long as the change of posture is carried out in full awareness.

3. *Loud sound can occur.* Label it “hearing” and observe the process of hearing. Notice the volume of the sound, its impact on the ear, and any mental reactions. It is not good to spend too much time on external sounds because this leads to distraction. Do not decide to take sound as a primary object.

4. *Internal seeing may arise—visions and visual impressions of colors, forms, landscapes, and sights either remembered or imaginary, realistic or fantastic.* Or visions of colors, forms, sights either remembered or imaginary may arise. It is to be labeled “seeing” and observed. Be careful not to get carried away with it, for it can become absorbing and thrilling and is often quite pleasant. This can become an issue for some meditators.

5. *Moods or mental states—joy, sloth, hatred, and so forth—will become pervasive, strong, or predominant.* Take the mood as the object; label and observe it. If it dissipates, return to the rising and falling. Often, moods and emotions will be associated with sensations in the body. If so, give preference to those sensations rather than any thoughts that may also be arising in association with the mood.

In brief, one must label and observe everything. Whatever object is the most predominant at any given moment is the focus of attention.

You start off with the rising and falling; initially, this develops concentration and stabilizes the mind. Later on, examining a greater array of objects builds energy and flexibility. You also return to the primary object whenever there is nothing else that is clear and easy to observe. If several objects are about the same in their intensity, simply choose one of them.

Mental Factors for Success

The most important meditative factor is mindfulness. It should be continuous, ideally from the moment of waking up to the moment of falling asleep. Concentration and effort are important too. The jhanic factor of “aiming” (*vitakka*) is the knowing mind focused at the object. It is with effort (*viriyā*) that we propel the mind toward the object. When the mind and object are in contact there is “rubbing” (*vicāra*)—a connected contact of attention and object. Mindfulness will arise, and so will wisdom, based on concentration.

Schedule on Retreat

In the beginning of a retreat, you should sit one hour and walk one hour, more or less. Forty-five minutes of each is also fine. Later on you can sit longer and walk a bit less. On retreat, meditation lasts all day and evening. Meditators get up at four or five o'clock in the morning and stay up as late as they can, meditating. They often reduce their hours of sleep to four or even fewer. Often, too, the last meal of the day is eliminated and only tea is taken. This helps increase the hours of practice and reduce sleepiness; it also adds wholesome volition by following the example of monks and nuns, whose precepts include foregoing the evening meal.

Walking Meditation Instructions

Choose a lane or path where you can walk up and down undisturbed. Divide one hour of walking meditation into three segments.

For the first twenty minutes you can walk relatively fast. Note “left, right, left, right” while paying attention to the predominant sensations in the relevant legs and feet.

For the next twenty minutes, walk a little slower. Note “lifting, placing” or “lifting, lowering” while paying close attention only to the foot that is moving. When you note “lifting,” try to have the noting and the attention coincide at exactly the moment when the heel leaves the ground. When you note “placing” or “lowering,” start with the first moment of heaviness arising in the foot. Register the first touch on the ground and stick with the shift in weight until the foot is fully still. Then move your attention to the other foot, the one that is about to move.



The slower you go, the faster you will progress.

During the final twenty minutes, walk as slowly as possible. Note “lifting, moving, placing” while paying attention to the moving foot only. The slower you go, the faster you will progress!

During walking meditation, you will be aware of sensations or movement. There may be trembling or unsteadiness, especially at first. The movement will not be continuous, and you may also experience slightly odd sensations. For example, you may feel as if you or your foot are being pushed.

Practice restraint of the senses, not looking here and there. Nor is it necessary to look at the feet; just place your gaze a little ahead of yourself, so that you can see where you are going. Sense-restraint while walking develops concentration; it also avoids unwholesome mental states not yet arisen.

General Activities

Slow down all your movements on retreat. Moving super slowly is a great tactic, which helps us see many, many minute details in the body and the mind. Myriad things arise that we are usually not aware of; seeing them develops wisdom. However, if you succeed only in feeling restless, or if a torrent of thoughts develops, find a pace where your mindfulness can coordinate with your body movements.

You should be aware of all activities without exception. If there is a sound on waking, it should be noted. Notice sitting up in bed. Also be aware of meals, of taking food onto the plate, and of all the complex activities required for eating.

Continuity, restraint, and slowness will support your meditation. 🌿

Adapted from *The State of Mind Called Beautiful* (Wisdom 2012)



See Things Clear Through

In this practical and pointed meditation instruction, **Upasika Kee Nanayon**, the foremost woman dhamma teacher in twentieth-century Thailand, shows us how to combine concentration and clear-seeing to penetrate the “mass of deceit” that is the mind.

IT'S IMPORTANT THAT we discuss the steps of the practice in training the mind, for the mind has all sorts of deceptions by which it fools itself. If you aren't skillful in investigating and seeing through them, they are very difficult to overcome, even if you're continually mindful to keep watch over the mind. You have to make an effort to contemplate these things at all times. Mindfulness on its own won't be able to give rise to any real knowledge. At best, it can give you only a little protection against the effects of sensory contact. If you don't make a focused contemplation, the mind won't be able to give rise to any knowledge within itself at all.

This is why you have to train yourself to be constantly aware all around. When you come to know anything for what it really is, there's nothing but letting go, letting go. On the beginning level,

this means the mind won't give rise to any unwise or unprofitable thoughts. It will simply stop to watch, stop to know within itself. If there's anything you have to think about, keep your thoughts on the themes of inconstancy, stress and not-self. You have to keep the mind thinking and labeling solely in reference to these sorts of themes, for if your thinking and labeling are right, you'll come to see things rightly. If you go the opposite way and label things wrongly, you'll see things wrongly as well. This keeps the mind completely hidden from itself.



When you come to know anything for what it really is, there's nothing but letting go, letting go.

Now, when thoughts or labels arise in the mind, then if you focus on watching them closely, you'll see that they're sensations—sensations of arising and disbanding, changeable, unreliable and illusory. If you don't make an effort to keep a focused watch on them, you'll fall for the deceptions of thought-fabrication. In other words, the mind gives rise to memories of the past and fashions issues dealing with the past, but if you're aware of what's going on in time, you'll see that they're all illusory. There's no real truth to them at all. Even the meanings the mind gives to good and bad sensory contacts at the moment they occur—if you carefully observe and contemplate them, you'll see that they're all deceptive. There's no real truth to them. But ignorance and delusion latch onto them, and this drives the mind around in circles. It

doesn't know what's what—how these things arise, persist and disband—so it latches on to them and gets itself deceived on many, many levels. If you don't stop and focus, there's no way you can see through these things.

But if the mind keeps its balance, stopping to watch and know itself, it realizes these things for what they are. When it does that, it lets them go automatically without being attached. This is the knowledge that comes with true mindfulness and discernment. It knows and lets go; it doesn't cling. No matter what appears—good or bad, pleasure or pain—when the mind knows, it doesn't cling. *When it doesn't cling, there's no stress or suffering.* You have to keep hammering away at this point. When it doesn't cling, the mind can stay at normalcy: empty, undisturbed and quiet. But if it doesn't read and know itself in this way, it will fall for the deceptions of defilement and craving. It will fashion all sorts of complex and complicated things that it will have a hard time seeing through, for they have their ways of playing up to the mind to keep it attached to them, all of which is simply a matter of the mind's falling for the deceptions of the defilements and cravings within itself. The fact that it isn't acquainted with itself—doesn't know how mental states arise and disband and take on objects—means that it loses itself in its many, many attachments.

There's nothing as hard to keep watch of as the mind, because it's so accustomed to wrong views and wrong opinions. This is what keeps it hidden from itself. But thanks to the teachings of the Buddha, we can gain knowledge into the mind, or into

consciousness with its many layers and intricacies, which when you look into it deeply, you'll find it to be empty—empty of any meaning in and of itself.

This is an emptiness that can appear clearly within consciousness. Even though it's hidden and profound, we can see into it by looking inward in a way that's quiet and still. The mind stops to watch, to know within itself. As for sensory contacts—sights, sounds, smells, tastes and that sort of thing—it isn't interested, because it's intent on looking into consciousness pure and simple, to see what arises in there and how it generates issues. Sensations, thoughts, labels for pleasure and pain and so forth, are all natural phenomena that change as soon as they're sensed—and they're very refined. If you view them as being about this or that matter, you won't be able to know them for what they are. The more intricate the meanings you give them, the more lost you become—lost in the whorls of the cycle of rebirth.

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Thanks to the teachings of the Buddha, we can gain knowledge into the mind, which when you look into it deeply, you'll find it to be empty—empty of any meaning in and of itself.

The cycle of rebirth and the processes of thought-fabrication are one and the same thing. As a result, we whirl around and around, lost in many, many levels of thought-fabrication, not just one.

The knowledge that would read the heart can't break through, for it whirls around and around in these very same thought-fabrications, giving them meaning in terms of this or that, and then latching on to them. If it labels them as good, it latches on to them as good. If it labels them as bad, it latches onto them as bad. This is why the mind stays entirely in the whorls of the cycle of rebirth, the cycle of thought-fabrication.

To see these things clearly requires the effort to stop and watch, to stop and know in *an appropriate way*, in a way that's just right. At the same time, you have to use your powers of observation. *That's* what will enable you to read your own consciousness in a special way. Otherwise, if you latch onto the issues of thoughts and labels, they'll keep you spinning around. So you have to stop and watch, stop and know clearly by *focusing on the consciousness in charge*. That way your knowledge will become skillful. Ultimately, you'll see that there's nothing at all—just the arising and disbanding occurring every moment in emptiness. If there's no attachment, there are no issues. There's simply the natural phenomenon of arising and disbanding. But since we don't see things simply as natural phenomena, we see them as being true and latch onto them as self, as good or bad, and as all sorts of complicated things. This keeps us spinning around without knowing how to find a way out or what to let go of—we just don't know. When we don't know, we're like a person who wanders into a jungle and can't find the way out.

Actually, what we have to let go of lies right smack in front of us, where the mind fashions things and gives them meanings so that it doesn't know the characteristics of arising and disbanding, pure and simple. If you can simply keep watching and knowing, without any need for meanings, thoughts, imaginings—simply watching the process itself—there won't be any issues. There's just the phenomenon of the present: arising, persisting, disbanding, arising, persisting, disbanding. There's no special trick to this, but you have to stop and watch, stop and know within yourself *at every moment*. Don't let your awareness stream away from awareness to outside preoccupations. Gather it in so it can know itself clearly—that there's nothing in there worth latching onto. It's all a mass of deceit. To know just this much is very useful for seeing the truth inside yourself. You'll see that consciousness is empty of any self. When you look at physical phenomena, you'll see them as elements, as empty of self. You'll see mental phenomena as empty of self, as elements of consciousness. And you'll see that if there's no attachment, no latching on, there's no suffering or stress.

So even if there's thinking going on in the mind, simply watch it, let it go, and its cycling will slow down. Fewer and fewer thought-fabrications will occur. Even if the mind doesn't stop completely, it will form fewer and fewer thoughts. You'll be able to stop and watch, stop and know more and more. And this way, you'll come to see the tricks and deceits of thought-fabrication, mental labels, pleasure and pain, and so on. You'll be able to know that there's really nothing inside—that the reason you were

deluded into latching onto things was your ignorance, and that you made yourself suffer right there in that very ignorance. So you have to focus on one point, one thing. Focusing on many things won't do. Keep mindfulness in place: stopping, knowing, seeing. Don't let it run out after thoughts and labels. But knowing in this way requires that you make the effort to stay focused—focused on seeing clearly, not just focused on making the mind still. Focus on seeing clearly. Look inside to see clearly, and contemplate how to let go. The mind will become empty in line with its nature in a way that you'll know exclusively within.

A Difference in the Knowing

What can we do to see the aggregates—this mass of suffering and stress—so clearly that we can cut attachment for them out of the mind? Why is it that people studying to be doctors can know everything in the body—intestines, liver, kidneys and all—down to the details, and yet don't develop any dispassion or disenchantment for it? Why is it that undertakers can spend their time with countless corpses and yet not gain any insight at all? This shows that insight is hard to attain. If there's no mindfulness and discernment to see things clearly for what they are, knowledge is simply a passing fancy. It doesn't sink in. The mind keeps latching onto its attachments.

But if the mind can gain true insight to the point where it can relinquish its attachments, it can gain the paths and fruitions leading to nibbana. This shows that there's a difference

in the knowing. It's not that we have to know all the details like modern-day surgeons. All we have to know is that the body is composed of the four physical elements plus the elements of space and consciousness. If we *really* know just this much, we've reached the paths and their fruitions, while those who know all the details, to the point where they can perform fine surgery, don't reach any transcendent attainments at all.

So let's analyze the body into its elements so as to know them thoroughly. If we do, then when there are changes in the body and mind, there won't be too much clinging. If we don't, our attachments will be fixed and strong and will lead to future states of being and birth.

Now that we have the opportunity, we should contemplate the body and take it apart to get down to the details. Take the five basic meditation objects—hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth and skin—and look at them carefully one at a time. You don't have to take on all five, you know. Focus on the hair of the head to see that it belongs to the earth element, to see that its roots are soaked in blood and lymph under the skin. It's unattractive in terms of its color, its smell and where it dwells. If you analyze and contemplate these things, you won't be deluded into regarding them as yours: your hair, your nails, your teeth, your skin.

All of these parts are composed of the earth element mixed in with water, wind and fire. If they were purely earth they wouldn't last, because every part of the body has to be composed of all four elements for it to be a body. And then there's a mental

phenomenon, the mind, in charge. These are things that follow in line with nature—the arising, changing and disbanding of physical and mental phenomena—but we latch onto them, seeing the body as ours, the mental phenomena as us: it's all us and ours. If we don't see these things for what they are, we'll do nothing but cling to them.

This is what meditation is: seeing things clearly for what they are. It's not a matter of switching from topic to topic, for that would simply ensure that you wouldn't know a thing. But our inner character, under the sway of ignorance and delusion, doesn't like examining itself repeatedly. It keeps finding other issues to get in the way, so that we think constantly about other things. This is why we stay so ignorant and foolish.

Then why is it that we can know other things? Because they fall in line with what craving wants. To see things clearly for what they are would be to abandon craving, so it finds ways of keeping things hidden. It keeps changing, bringing in new things, keeping us fooled, so that we study and think about nothing but matters that add to the mind's suffering and stress. That's all that craving wants. As for the kind of study that would end the stress and suffering in the mind, it's always getting in the craving's way.

This is why the mind is always wanting to shift to new things to know, new things to fall for. And this is why it's always becoming attached. So when it doesn't really know itself, you have to make a real effort to see the truth that the things within it aren't you or yours. Don't let the mind stop short of this knowledge.

Make this a law within yourself. If the mind doesn't know the truths of inconstancy, stress, and not-self within itself, it won't gain release from suffering. Its knowledge will be worldly knowledge; it will follow a worldly path. It won't reach the paths and fruition leading to nibbana.

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Our inner character, under the sway of ignorance and delusion, doesn't like examining itself repeatedly. It keeps finding other issues to get in the way, so that we think constantly about other things. This is why we stay so ignorant and foolish.

So this is where the worldly and the transcendent part ways. If you comprehend inconstancy, stress and not-self to the ultimate degree, that's the transcendent. If you don't get down to their details, you're still on the worldly level.

The Buddha has many teachings, but this is what they all come down to. The important principles of the practice—the four establishings of mindfulness, the Four Noble Truths—all come down to these characteristics of inconstancy, stress and not-selfness. If you try to learn too many principles, you'll end up with no clear knowledge of the truth as it is. *If you focus on knowing just a little, you'll end up with more true insight than if you try knowing a lot. It's through wanting to know too many things that we end up deluded.*

We wander around in our deluded knowledge, thinking and labeling things, *but knowledge that is focused and specific, when it really knows, is absolute*. It keeps hammering away at one point. There's no need to know a lot of things, for when you really know one thing, everything converges right there.

The Balanced Way

In practicing the dhamma, if you don't foster a balance between concentration and discernment, you'll end up going wild in your thinking. If there's too much working at discernment, you'll go wild in your thinking. But if there's too much concentration, the mind just stays still and undisturbed without coming to any knowledge. So you have to keep discernment and stillness in balance. Don't let there be too much of one or the other. Try to get them just right. That's when you'll be able to see things clearly all the way through. Otherwise you'll stay as deluded as ever. You may try to gain discernment into too many things—and as a result your thinking goes wild. Some people keep wondering why discernment never arises in their practice, but when it does arise they really go off on a tangent. Their thinking goes wild, all out of bounds.

So when you practice, you have to observe in your meditation how you can make the mind still. Once it does grow still, it tends to get stuck there. Or it may become empty, without any knowledge of anything: quiet, disengaged, at ease for a while, but

without any discernment to accompany it. But if you *can* get discernment to accompany your concentration, that's when you'll really benefit.

You'll see things all the way through and be able to let them go. If you're too heavy on the side of either discernment or stillness, you can't let go. The mind may come to know this or that, but it latches onto its knowledge. Then it knows still other things and latches onto them, too. Or else it simply stays perfectly quiet and latches onto *that*.

It's not easy to keep your practice on the Middle Way. If you don't use your powers of observation, it's especially hard. The mind will keep falling for things, sometimes right, sometimes wrong, because it doesn't observe what's going on. This isn't the path to letting go. It's a path to getting stuck, caught in things. If you don't know what it's stuck and caught in, you'll remain foolish and deluded. So make an effort at focused contemplation until you see clearly into inconstancy, stress and not-self. This, without a doubt, will stop every moment of suffering and stress.

The Uses of Equanimity

The sensations of the mind are subtle and very volatile. Sometimes passion or irritation can arise independently of sensory contact, simply in line with one's character. For instance, there are times when the mind is perfectly normal and all of a sudden there's irritation—or there's a desire to form thoughts and get engrossed in feelings of pain, pleasure or equanimity. We have to

contemplate these three kinds of feeling to see how they're inconstant, always changing and stressful, so that the mind won't go and get engrossed in them. This business of getting engrossed is subtle. It keeps us from knowing what's what; it is delusion pure and simple. Being engrossed in feelings of pleasure is relatively easy to detect, but being engrossed in feelings of equanimity, that's hard to notice, if the mind is at equanimity in an oblivious way. This oblivious equanimity keeps us from seeing anything clearly.

So you have to focus on seeing feelings simply as feelings and pull the mind out of its infatuation with equanimity. When there's a feeling of equanimity as the mind gathers and settles down, use that feeling of equanimity in concentration as the basis for probing into inconstancy, stress and not-self—for this equanimity in concentration at the fourth level of absorption (*jhana*) is the basis for liberating insight. Simply make sure that you don't get attached to the absorption.

If you get the mind to grow still in equanimity without focusing on gaining insight, it's simply a temporary state of concentration. So you have to focus on gaining clear insight into either inconstancy, stress or not-selfness. That's when you'll be able to uproot your attachments. If the mind gets into a state of oblivious equanimity, it's still carrying fuel inside it. Then as soon as there's sensory contact, it flares up into attachment. So we have to follow the principles the Buddha laid down: focus the mind into a state of absorption and then focus on gaining clear insight into the three

characteristics. The proper way to practice is not to let yourself get stuck on this level or that—and *no matter what insights you may gain, don't go thinking that you've gained Awakening*. Keep looking. Keep focusing and see if there are any further changes in the mind, and if there are, see the stress and the not-selfness of those changes. If you can know in this way, the mind will rise above feeling, no longer entangled in this level or that level, all of which are simply matters of speculation.

The important thing is that you try to see clearly. Even when the mind is fabricating all sorts of objects in a real turmoil, see these objects as illusory. Then stay still and watch their disbanding. See clearly that there's really nothing to them. They all disband. All that remains is the empty mind—the mind maintaining its balance in normalcy. Focus on examining *that*. There are many levels of examining the diseases in the mind, not just one. If you come up with a genuine insight, don't stop there—and don't get excited about seeing things you never saw before. Just keep contemplating the theme of inconstancy in everything, without latching on, and then you'll come to even more penetrating insights.

So keep focusing until the mind stops, until it reaches the stage of absorption called purity of mindfulness and equanimity. See what pure mindfulness is like. As for the feeling of equanimity, that's an affair of concentration. It's what the mindfulness depends on so that it too can reach equanimity. This is the stage

where we consolidate our awareness in order to come in and know the mind. Get the mind centered, at equanimity, and then probe in and contemplate. That's when you'll be able to see.

Emptiness Versus the Void

Opening the door and really seeing inside yourself isn't easy, but you can train yourself to do it. If you have sufficient mindfulness to read yourself and understand yourself, that cuts through a lot of issues right there. Craving will have a hard time forming. In whatever guise it arises, you'll get to read it, to know it, to extinguish it, to let it go. When you get to do these things, it doesn't mean that you "get" anything, for actually once the mind is empty, it doesn't gain anything at all. But to put it into words for those who haven't experienced it: In what ways is emptiness empty? Does it mean that everything disappears or is annihilated? Actually, emptiness doesn't mean that the mind is annihilated. All that's annihilated is clinging and attachment. What you have to do is this: see what emptiness is like as it actually appears and then not latch onto it. The nature of this emptiness is that it's deathless within you—this emptiness of self—and yet the mind can still function, know and read itself. Just don't label it or latch onto it, that's all.

There are many levels of emptiness, many types, but if it's emptiness of this or that type, then it's not genuine emptiness, for it contains the intention that's trying to know what type of emptiness it is, what features it has. This is something you have to

look into deeply if you really want to know. If it's superficial emptiness—the emptiness of the still mind, free from thought-fabrications about its objects or free from the external sense of self—that's not genuine emptiness. Genuine emptiness lies deep, not on the level of mere stillness or concentration. The emptiness of the void is something very profound.

But because of what we've studied and heard, we tend to label the emptiness of the still mind as the void—but this is labeling things wrongly in that emptiness. Actually, it's just ordinary stillness. We have to look more deeply. No matter what you've encountered or you've heard about before, don't get excited. Don't label it as this or that level of attainment. Otherwise you'll spoil everything. You reach the level where you should be able to keep your awareness steady, but once you label things, it stops right there—or else goes all out of control.

This labeling is attachment in action. It's very subtle, very refined. Whatever appears, it latches on. So you simply have to let the mind be empty without labeling it as anything. The emptiness that lets go of preoccupations or that's free from the influence of thought-fabrications is something you have to look further into. Don't label it as this or that level, for to measure and compare things in this way blocks everything—and in particular, knowledge of how the mind changes.

So to start out, simply watch these things; simply be aware. If you get excited, you'll ruin everything. Instead of seeing things clear through, you won't. You'll stop there and won't go any

further. For this reason, when you train the mind or contemplate the mind to the point of gaining clear realizations every now and then, regard them as simply things to observe. ❁

Excerpted from *Pure and Simple: The Extraordinary Teachings of a Thai Buddhist Laywoman*, by Upasika Kee Nanayon; selected and translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Wisdom Publications, 2005)



It All Depends

Reality may seem solid, says **Bhikkhu Bodhi**, but it is merely a reflection of unstable, conditioned processes, or *sankharas*, coming together with no one in charge.

IMPERMANENT, ALAS, are conditioned things! Their very nature is to arise and vanish. Having arisen they then cease. Their subsiding is blissful!

In Theravada Buddhist lands, this verse is always recited at funerals to console the grievors over the death of a loved one. However, I have not quoted it here in order to begin an obituary. I do so simply to introduce a term that I wish to explore. The term is *sankhara*, one of those Pali words with such rich implications that merely to draw them out sheds abundant light on the Buddha's understanding of reality.

The word occurs in the opening line of the above verse: *Anicca vata sankhara*, "Impermanent, alas, are conditioned things!" *Sankhara* is a plural noun derived from the prefix *sam*, meaning "together," joined with the noun *kara*, meaning "doing" or "making." The corresponding verb is *sankharoti*, "to put together"

or “to compose,” which is sometimes augmented with another prefix to yield the verb *abhisankharoti*, which usually indicates that volition is involved in the process of “putting together” or composing. Etymologically, sankharas are thus “co-doings”: both things that act in unison with other things to produce an effect and the things produced by the combined action of those productive forces. Translators have rendered the word in many different ways: formations, confections, activities, processes, fabrications, forces, compounds, compositions, concoctions, determinations, synergies, constructions. All are clumsy, imprecise attempts to capture the meaning of a concept for which we have no exact parallel in English.

Although it may be impossible to discover an exact English equivalent for *sankhara*, by exploring its actual usage we can see how the word functions in the thought world of the Buddha’s teachings.

Sankharas in Dependent Origination

In the suttas, the word *sankhara* occurs in four major doctrinal contexts. One is the twelve-fold formula of dependent origination (*paticca-samuppada*), where the sankharas are the second link in the series, conditioned by ignorance and functioning as a condition for consciousness. Looking at statements from various suttas, we can see that the sankharas are the volitional activities responsible for producing karma and generating rebirth. They are thus the factors that shape our destiny as we revolve in samsara,

the round of birth and death. In this context the word sankhara is virtually synonymous with kamma, a word to which it is etymologically akin. Both are derived from the verb karoti, meaning “to act, do, or make.”

The suttas distinguish the sankharas active in dependent origination into three types: bodily, verbal, and mental. Again, they are divided into the meritorious, demeritorious, and imperturbable—that is, the volitions present in the four formless meditations. When ignorance and craving underlie our stream of consciousness, our volitional activities of body, speech, and mind have a capacity to produce karmic fruits. The most significant fruit they produce is the renewal of the stream of consciousness following death. It is the sankharas, propped up by ignorance and fueled by craving, that drive the stream of consciousness onward to a new birth. Moreover, exactly where consciousness heads is determined by the karmic character of the sankharas. If one engages in meritorious deeds, the sankharas, or volitional activities, will propel consciousness toward a fortunate sphere of rebirth. If one engages in demeritorious deeds, the sankharas will propel consciousness toward a rebirth in a lower realm. And if one masters the formless meditations, the imperturbable sankharas will propel consciousness toward rebirth in the formless realms.

The Aggregate of Volitional Activities

A second major sphere to which the word *sankharas* applies is among the five aggregates. The fourth aggregate is the *sankhara-khandha*, the aggregate of volitional activities. The texts explicitly define the *sankhara-khandha* as the six classes of volition (*chacetanakaya*): volition regarding forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, and ideas. Though these *sankharas* correspond closely to those in the formula of dependent origination, the two are not exactly the same. The *sankhara-khandha*, the aggregate of volitional activities, has a wider range. It comprises all kinds of volition, not merely those volitions that are karmically potent but also those that are karmically passive and karmically inoperative.



The most important fact to understand about *sankharas*, as conditioned phenomena, is that they are all impermanent.

In the later Pali literature, the *sankhara-khandha* becomes an umbrella category for all factors of mind except feeling and perception, which are aggregates on their own. Thus the *sankhara-khandha* comes to include wholesome factors such as non-greed, non-hatred, and wisdom; unwholesome factors such as greed, hatred, and delusion; and ethically variable factors such as contact, attention, thought, and energy. Since all these factors

arise in conjunction with volition, the early Buddhist teachers decided that the most fitting place to assign them is in the aggregate of volitional activities.

Sankharas as Conditioned Phenomena

The third major sphere in which the word *sankhara* occurs is as a designation for all conditioned things. In this context, the word has a passive sense, denoting whatever is produced by a combination of conditions—that is, whatever is conditioned, constructed, or fabricated. In this sense it might be rendered simply as “conditioned phenomena.” The Pali commentaries, in fact, explain this kind of *sankharas* as *sankhata-sankhara*, “*sankharas* consisting in the conditioned,” *sankhata* being the past participle of the verb *sankharoti*, from which *sankhara* is derived. As conditioned phenomena, *sankharas* include *all five aggregates*, not just the fourth aggregate. The term also includes external objects and phenomena such as mountains, fields, and forests; towns, cities, and villages; food and drink; and we can add to the classical list cars, iPhones, and computers.

Sankharas in the Stages of Meditation

The fourth context for the word *sankhara* is a meditative one. Here the word is used to refer to bodily, verbal, and mental phenomena in their relationship to the stages of meditation. We find this usage in *Majjhima Nikaya* sutta 44. Here, the bodily *sankhara* is identified with inhalation and exhalation “because these things

are bodily, dependent on the body.” The verbal sankhara is identified with thought and examination “because first one thinks and examines, and then breaks out into speech.” The mental sankhara is identified with perception and feeling “because these things are mental, dependent on the mind.”

In the development of deeper meditative states, the verbal sankhara ceases with the attainment of the second jhana, in which thought and examination subside; the bodily sankhara ceases with the attainment of the fourth jhana, in which breathing stops; and the mental sankhara ceases with “the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling.”

Putting the Brake to the Sankharas

The fact that sankharas can include both active forces and the things produced by them is highly significant and secures for the term its role as the cornerstone of the Buddha’s philosophical vision. What the Buddha teaches is that the sankharas in the two active senses—the volitional activities operative in dependent origination and the karmic volitions in the fourth aggregate—construct the sankharas in the passive sense: “They construct the conditioned; therefore they are called volitional activities. And what are the conditioned things they construct? They construct material form, feeling, perception, volitional activities, and consciousness; therefore they are called volitional activities” (*Samyutta Nikaya* 22:79).

Though external inanimate things may arise from purely physical causes, the sankharas that make up our personal being—the five aggregates—are all products of the karmically active sankharas, particularly those we created in our previous lives. In the present life as well, the five aggregates are constantly being maintained, refurbished, and extended by the volitional activities we engage in now, which again become conditions for future existence. Thus, the Buddha teaches, it was our own karmically constructive sankharas that have built up our present edifice of personal being, and it is our present constructive sankharas that are building up the edifices of personal being we will inhabit in future lives. These edifices consist of nothing other than sankharas as conditioned things, the conditioned phenomena comprised in the five aggregates.



When we put the word sankhara under our microscope, we can see compressed within it the entire worldview of the dhamma.

The most important fact to understand about sankharas, as conditioned phenomena, is that they are all impermanent: “Impermanent, alas, are sankharas.” They are impermanent not only in the sense that in their gross manifestations they will eventually cease to be, but even more pointedly because at the subtle level they are constantly undergoing rise and fall, forever coming into being and then, in a split second, breaking up and perishing:

“Their very nature is to arise and vanish.” For this reason the Buddha declares that all sankharas are suffering (*sabbe sankhara dukkha*). However, they are suffering not because they are all actually painful and stressful but because they are stamped with the mark of transience: “Having arisen, they then cease.” Because they all cease, they cannot provide stable happiness and security.

To win complete release from suffering, we must attain release not only from personal experiential suffering but also from the unsatisfactoriness intrinsic to all conditioned existence. This aspect of suffering is called *sankhara-dukkha*. It is the dimension of *dukkha* that is inseparable from our journey through the round of birth and death. What lies beyond the sankharas is that which is not constructed, not put together, not compounded. This is *nibbana*, which is accordingly called the unconditioned (*asankhata*)—the opposite of what is *sankhata*, constructed, put together, compounded. *Nibbana* is called the unconditioned precisely because it is a state that is neither itself a *sankhara* nor constructed by *sankharas*; it is a state described as *visankhara*, “devoid of conditioning activities, devoid of the conditioned,” and as *sabbasankhara-samatha*, “the stilling of all conditioned phenomena.”

Thus, when we put the word *sankhara* under our microscope, we can see compressed within it the entire worldview of the *dhamma*. The active *sankharas* comprising karmically active volitions perpetuate the *sankharas* of the five aggregates that constitute our being. We identify with the five aggregates because of

ignorance, and we seek enjoyment in them because of craving. On account of ignorance and craving, we engage in volitional activities that build up future combinations of the five aggregates, which become our personal identities in successive lives. Just that is the nature of samsara: an unbroken procession of empty but efficient sankharas producing still other sankharas, rising up in fresh waves with each new birth, swelling to a crest, and then crashing down into old age, illness, and death. On and on it goes, shrouded in the delusion that we're really in control, sustained by an ever-tantalizing, ever-receding hope of final satisfaction.

When, however, we take up the practice of the dhamma, we apply a brake to this relentless generation of sankharas. Through wisdom we remove ignorance; through renunciation we remove craving. We see with wisdom the true nature of the sankharas as unstable, conditioned processes rolling on with no one in charge. We thereby switch off the engine driven by ignorance and craving, and in doing so, the process of karmic construction—the production of active sankharas—is effectively shut down. By putting an end to the constructing of conditioned reality, we open the door to what is ever-present but not constructed, not conditioned: the *asankhata-dhatu*, the unconditioned element. This is nibbana, the deathless, the stilling of volitional activities, final liberation from all conditionings and thus from impermanence and death. Therefore, our verse concludes: “The subsiding of sankharas is blissful!” ❁